

The Day On Fire

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

READER'S SERVICE
Presb. Board of Foreign Missions



AN ABRIDGEMENT

The abridgements reprinted in this book are used by permission of and by special arrangement with the publishers holding the respective copyrights.

COPYRIGHT 1959
BY BOOKS ABRIDGED, INC.

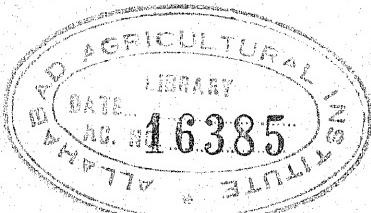
All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or parts thereof in any form.

41

PRINTED IN
THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

The Author

After graduating from Princeton in 1929, JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN worked as a reporter for a Brooklyn newspaper and made his first venture into the theatre as a playwright. From 1933 to 1939, he was producer or coproducer of some dozen plays on Broadway. Since 1939, excepting a wartime interlude as an officer of the American Field Service in Africa, he has been a full-time writer. Many of his novels have been best sellers; among them "River of The Sun" and "The White Tower."



THE DAY ON FIRE
James Ramsey Ullman
Published by
The World Publishing Company
Copyright © 1958 by James Ramsey Ullman

Mon âme éternelle,
Observe ton voeu,
Malgré le nuit seule
Et le jour en feu.

My eternal soul,
Redeem your promise,
Inspite of the night alone
And the day on fire.

Rimbaud

PART ONE

The Possessed

((1))

TODAY they were all wearing blue serge suits. Usually it was only Claude. Day after day, year after year, it had been only Claude; he alone in serge and starched collar, black stockings and black shoes. "*Le beau gosse*," they had once called him. "Pretty boy. Mama's darling." But that was before they had learned that his small fists could hit and his shined shoes could kick. Or that his help with homework made the difference between honors and failure. And now, today, they were all mamas' darlings. All in serge and starch, with scrubbed faces and slicked hair.

It was the final day of the term—prize day—for the next-to-last form of the Lycée de Cambon. Monsieur Izard, the headmaster, and Monsieur Chariol, the class teacher, were on the platform, and the headmaster was speaking. "And now—" he nodded to Monsieur Chariol, and Monsieur Chariol took from a table a pile of silvered paper wreaths. "Now," said the headmaster, "it is time to make the term awards for achievement." He produced a slip of paper and adjusted his prince-nez. "For excellence in mathematics Louis Carnot."



JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

A boy rose, went to the platform, and received a handshake and wreath. In the rear, hands applauded.

"For excellence in theoretical and applied science—Georges Vuiton." The procedure was repeated.

Monsieur Izard put away the slip of paper. There were five wreaths left. "For excellence in French literature," he announced, "—for excellence in English, excellence in Latin, excellence in Greek, excellence in medieval and modern history it is my pleasure to award these classic laurels to Claude Morel."

Claude rose and went forward. At fifteen, the youngest in the class and the smallest, he seemed less boy than child. His face was soft, oval, fine-featured; his hair light and silken; and his eyes were wide and unshadowed, the whites very white, the blue very blue. A most immature fifteen, one would have judged—until he moved—and then, strangely, the impression changed. For as he mounted the platform and stood before them, it was suddenly he who seemed the adult, and they the children.

Monsieur Izard shook his hand and put a wreath on his head. Then, addressing the room, he said, "We shall now hear the class oration from our honor student."

Claude faced the room. He bowed gravely. He began to speak: "*Salvete, O magistri honorati, hospites augusti, amici lectissimi... .*"

He stood erect but at ease. His face, under the leaves, was blandly calm, and the Latin flowed from his lips as if it had been his daily language. Looking down at his audience, in their sweat and boredom, his eyes glinted with mockery.

(())

The boys shuffled out. Monsieur Izard greeted the parents. Monsieur Chariol put a hand on Claude's shoulder. "My little monster of erudition," he said affectionately.

Monsieur Chariol, who was young—a mere twenty-four—with a dark sensitive face, was not greatly given to smiling.

THE DAY ON FIRE

Indeed, after three years in this backwater school, he would probably have ceased altogether—had it not been for this one pupil fate had granted him. For Claude Morel was that rare and precious bird of which all teachers dream but seldom encounter: the true student.

"I am proud of you, boy," he said now to Claude. "You have made it a happy year for me."

"Thank you, *mon maître*." Claude looked up at him, and there was no longer mockery in his eyes. "And you have made it happy for me," he answered.

Outside there was a confusion of boys, families, hellos, goodbyes. Michel Favre came up to Claude. Broad and sturdy, with black imp's eyes, he was Claude's closest friend in the class. "No mother?" he asked.

Claude shook his head. "She wouldn't leave the store."

"Mine's not here either. Let's go."

Then the crowd and the school were gone. They walked down the dusty summer street, kicking stones.

"Where are your wreaths?" Michel asked.

"I found a wastebasket."

"Won't your mother want to see them?"

"She'd just say, 'Why isn't the silver real?'"

Michel picked up a stone and threw it at a tree. "The hell with wreaths," he said. "The hell with school and mothers. It's vacation. Let's celebrate!"

"How?"

"Let's—let's—" Michel thought it over. "I've got it: girls!"

"What do you mean, girls?"

"We get two—for tonight." Michel became excited. "Yes, look, listen—There's one of those traveling carnivals playing now over in Antimes. It's just an hour's walk, so after supper we get the girls and—"

"What girls?" said Claude.

"Louise Croz for me. Mimi Rouger for you. What's the matter, you don't want to?"

"I—I don't know them."

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

"Sure you know them. You've seen them all over town."

"I can't go to the carnival," Claude said. "I've no money."

"Nothing?"

"When did I ever?"

"All right—I've got four francs still from my birthday, and that's enough for us both." Michel paused and waited. "Well?" he asked.

Claude shook his head.

"You won't?"

"I can't."

"What do you mean, you can't? You mean you're afraid. You want to be a baby all your life, is that it? My God, you're fifteen—nearer sixteen. You're supposed to be a *man* when you're sixteen, and you're scared. You're scared as a puppydog. All right, be a puppydog. You're the one with your mama all over you. Mama's darling. *Le beau gosse*. Pfui!"

"I just can't go," Claude said quietly. "I've other plans."

"Plans? To do your homework for September? To stick your snoot in a book? . . . Aaah!" Michel kicked a stone hard. "Go on then. I'll get Jacques or Georges or someone."

They had come to a corner and he veered suddenly off. Claude did not try to stop him, but walked on alone. He passed the church, whitewashed and still; then a row of houses with cracked plaster fronts. He walked on. There was no sound. Nothing moved. The town was fixed in torpor. The leaves of the plane trees were brittle and silvered. They gave no shade, no coolness. Beyond them the sky glared, empty and inane.

Claude sat in the dust against a blank wall.

"You're afraid," Michel had said. And it had been the truth. He was afraid. Whether with no francs to his name—or with ten or ten thousand—he was still afraid. Of Louise Croz, of Mimi Rouger; of all girls.

"I've other plans," he had answered. And this too was the truth, and of this he was not afraid.

Other boys carried francs in their pocket. They carried knives, keys, matches, girls' brooches and lockets. . . . He

THE DAY ON FIRE

carried a pencil. . . . Now from his pocket he took his pencil and the folded paper on which was written his class oration, and on the blank side of the paper he wrote:

*I shall not speak, I shall not show my heart,
but still, within that heart, a fire will burn.
Far, far I'll go, alone, a wanderer,
and life, the wide earth itself, will be my love.*

(())

The Widow Morel sold dry goods and notions. Her store was not the biggest in Cambon, but it was not the smallest either, and in recent years it had prospered. Madame could long since have afforded to move herself and her children to better living quarters; she had chosen to remain in the cramped quarters above the shop; and though her trade was enough to have warranted at least one paid clerk, she refused even to consider such extravagance. Claude helped out after school hours. So did his sister Yvette, but she was four years younger and could manage only simple transactions. The one full-time assistant was his brother Felix, now seventeen; and "simple transactions" were his maximum, also. Tall, big-boned, powerful, with thick dark hair and heavy features, his mind was heavy too—slow and dull-edged.

Wrapped in lethargy, Felix was behind the counter when Claude came in. There were no customers in the shop, but they ignored each other.

Then Madame Morel came quickly down the stairs. "Ha, so it's you at last," she said. "What's taken you so long? School was to be out at three."

"There was—"

"And what have you been doing to yourself?" His mother came closer. "Your clothes are filthy. Look, those trousers—like you'd been rolling in the street." She slapped dust from his blue serge with a bony hand. "I sweat and slave in this store—ten, twelve, fourteen hours a day. I work myself to the grave

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

to dress you decently, educate you, make you into a gentleman, and what are you instead? A pig. *Un sale cochon!*"

It was not only her hands that were bony. Her face was, too, and her body, under her long black dress. Often that was all Claude saw in the face—the bones beneath the taut white flesh; or at least until she got angry (which was often) and then he saw the eyes too, black and harsh. They were harsh now, as she stared at him, and her voice was shrill.

"Do you hear me? *Cochon!*"

Claude said nothing. His face showed nothing. It was neither cowed nor defiant. It was blank.

Madame Morel turned abruptly away. She was a woman given, conversationally, to either torrents or silence, and now came a silence, as she rearranged merchandise on one of the shelves. Then Yvette came down the stairs, saw Claude, and ran to him.

"Hello, princess," he said, and smiled. For this was the one girl he was not afraid of.

Unlike Felix, she bore him a strong family resemblance. (By way of their father, he had surmised, though he could scarcely remember what their father looked like.) She had the same lightness of hair, of complexion, of body and feature; the same blue-white eyes—though softer, gentler; and now those eyes looked at him with adoration.

"How many wreaths did you win?" she asked.

"Five," he said.

"Ooh—let me see them."

"I—I left them at school."

"Five?" The mother had turned back to him. "Why only five? There are seven subjects. Which did you not get?"

"Mathematics and science."

"So—mathematics and science. The two subjects out of all of them that are of some practical use. It's with the others, the useless ones, you spend all your days and half the nights. What are you standing around for now?" she snapped. "I told you this morning there's new stock to be checked and sorted."

THE DAY ON FIRE

Claude stood still for a moment. Then he moved—but it was toward the door. “Where are you going?” his mother shouted.

But he didn’t answer. He went out. Circling the counter, she started after him, but as she reached the door a woman customer came in. “I hear you have received a new shipment of cretonne yard goods,” the woman said. “May I see what you have, please?”

The Widow Morel breathed in once, deeply. “But of course, madame,” she answered. “And I am sure you will find the prices most reasonable.”

(())

Claude walked through the streets of Cambon. He kept walking steadily, until he reached the Place de la Gare. Crossing the square, he entered the station and went to the ticket window. “When is the next train for Paris?” he asked.

“At five thirty,” the clerk said. “*Deuxième ou troisième?*”

“Neither, thank you. I’m finding out for a friend.”

He waited. Having no watch, he waited for what seemed like hours. Then he heard the train and, moving quickly, went to the far end of the station platform. The train was already coming in, and when it stopped he was beside the last coach. The *chef de gare* was at the center of the platform, a safe distance away, and there was no ticket taker in sight. He looked around once, briefly, and climbed aboard. A whistle screeched, the train shuddered, the wheels turned.

(())

Other boys had francs, knives, girls’ brooches and lockets. He had a pencil. And the pencil wrote:

*. . . and so the mother, holding the Book of Law,
stands proud and righteous, proud and tall and blind,
blind to the other eyes—her child’s—proud, too,
and blue and cold;
cold with a fire she cannot know, she cannot dream. . . .*

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

The pencil moved on. The train rolled on. The woman beside him was asleep.

He had not made his boarding haphazardly. The last coach, he knew, was composed of second-class compartments (in which—he had guessed correctly—no other Cambonards would be riding). Once in, he had selected a seat beside an elderly well-dressed lady, and for journey's end, and the collection of tickets in the Gare de l'Est, he had already made his plans.

Beyond the sooty glass the countryside of northern France flowed by. First the dark green forests, the Ardennes, the world surrounding Cambon that he knew so well. Then fields with only groves of trees, fields without trees at all, open, light green, with bands of yellow and amber, spreading soft and gleaming in the late afternoon sun. . . . Color! He could not merely see color, but feel, smell, taste, almost hear it; he could drink it, as others drank wine. . . . What color would Paris be, he wondered? Not green, surely—except in its parks. Not the amber and yellow of grain. It would be gray, of course, the gray of stone, but within the ancient stone there would be the glow of pink, of lavender. At night it would be black, but of a blackness pricked by a million fireflies.

He was writing again. Fragments. Words. Words that leaped and gleamed in his mind like the gleam of the sun.

Then he too must have slept; for when he looked up again the train was slowing, the light was fading, and beyond the window the flat twin towers of a cathedral stood up against the summer dusk. The train pulled into Reims. He had been in Reims before. Once, long ago, his mother had brought him here to visit an aunt. The train began moving again, and now Claude was farther from home than ever before. In *terra incognita*.

The sky arched over the land, over forests and fields, over towns and cities, over Reims, over Paris. It arched beyond Paris over more land, over all land, over the sea. He had never seen the sea, but he knew it well. The sea of the north, of the long-boats, the Vikings: gray, sullen, surging, under its pall of cloud.

THE DAY ON FIRE

And the sea of the south, of the triremes, the galleons: blue, pure and glittering in golden sunlight. He knew the lands beyond. The walls of Rome, the pillars of Greece, the twilight of Carthage, the white dazzle of Arabia. He knew Persia, Peru, India, Africa. . . .

Wheels clicked. The land flowed. Presently he was aware that the train was slowing. Some of the passengers rose, reaching for hats and bags, and the old lady beside him opened her pocketbook and took out her ticket.

Claude rose too. He moved to the compartment door. He turned the handle, and the door was open. Someone spoke sharply behind him, but he paid no attention. Outside, on one side of the door, was an iron bar, and he reached for it, held it, swung himself out and forward. Then he jumped. He landed. Gravel and cinders jerked away beneath his feet, and rose and hit him in the chest. Then he was sliding, and they were grating into his face. His knee struck something hard, and he felt a sharp pain. When he looked up the train was gone.

(())

The city roared. The city blazed. They were not fireflies that lit the night, but great gas lamps like yellow moons, by the thousand, the ten thousand, burning on the streets, the boulevards, the squares, the towers, the rooftops. Here was the City of Light. And of life. A city of the past, of the Valois, the Bourbons, two republics, and two empires. A city of the present. Here, in the full of the year 1870, was the end result of all the centuries of history, the distillation of man's culture. Here was the heart of France, and of civilization.

City of light, of sound, of voices. Capital of the world. . . . And through the city, now, a boy walking; a small-town boy, a country *mioche*, who seemed, alone among the millions, not to be talking, because there was no one for him to talk to.

Indeed, at first there had been no one even in sight. He had come up off the railway tracks into a district of factories and warehouses. He was still shaken from his grinding plunge from

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

the train, and his right leg throbbed painfully. Coming at last to a street lamp, he stopped and looked down, and saw that the blue serge of his trouser leg was dangling in tatters. He smiled. That was all right. But the knee under the tatters was bloody, and that was not so good. Opening his jacket, he pulled out his shirttail, ripped off a piece, and made a bandage. Then he went on. He went slowly, gropingly, but not aimlessly. For he was not lost; he knew where he was heading; for years he had read of Paris in the books of Balzac, Hugo, Dumas, a hundred others.

And then presently, surely enough, the city began to change. There were light and sound—and people. Everywhere, people. Always more and more people. Now he was on the Grands Boulevards. The lights, streaming away before him, were like the torches of an emperor's triumph. And under the torches moved the multitudes.

He forgot his scrapes and tatters. He forgot the pain in his knee. He forgot everything. The old Claude Morel, the boy in blue serge, the *mioche* from Cambon, was gone and lost, and he was a being newly created, whose only functions were to walk, to watch, to listen, to feel. And to walk on and on, through the magic night.

And it was not until much later, long hours later, that he realized the night had changed. It was still magical, but the magic was different. For the crowds were thinning, dissolving, the light and sound withdrawing, and now at last a hush was falling on the city, until even Paris itself was quiet and dark.

It was time to sleep. And, again, he knew where he was going. Once more he came to the Rue Royale; to the Concorde, vast and empty. And beyond it was the Seine. He heard the lapping of water, saw the outline of a bridge. Detouring, he clambered down a bank to the underside of the bridge, where it met the shore, and crept beneath its sheltering arch. In the gloom he could see dim figures sprawled around him, and he moved carefully, lest he step on one. Finding a bare space, he lay down on the stone. A figure beside him stirred, cursed, and

THE DAY ON FIRE

raised his head, and he had a quick image of a bearded face and small bloodshot eyes. Then the face fell away. Claude had come, he well knew, to the city's lodging of last resort, the caravansary of tramps and beggars, thieves and vagabonds. But he was not afraid. He belonged here. For was he not a vagabond himself?

((2))

IN THE black-walnut and horsehair parlor of her home above the store, the Widow Morel was speaking with Father Lacaze.

"I have done everything, Father," she said. "In the name of *le bon Dieu*, I have done everything. All my life I have worked, slaved, thought only of my children, so that they might grow up decent and godly; and now see how I am rewarded."

Father Lacaze pursed his lips and looked down at his paunch. "Yes, it is a sorrow, madame, and I know your feelings. A sorrow, and also a mystery. He has always been so good, so fine a boy. It is hard to explain."

"I am afraid I can explain it. All too well. It is the bad blood coming out—the blood of his father. My own parents warned me before I married him. 'You are making a mistake,' they said. 'He is no good; it will come to no good end.' And they were right. First—well, you have seen what happened. And now this. This shame and disgrace. It is retribution; the sins of the father—"

The priest looked uncomfortable. He was accustomed to distressed women; but most women were soft in their distress.

"At least he is coming home now," he said gently. "Perhaps when you have talked—"

"Yes, coming home. And how? With a policeman, a special officer." Madame Morel looked at the watch that hung on a ribbon down her black dress. "By now the train is already in. They are walking through the station, across the square, along the streets: my son a jailbird, with a policeman, for all Cambon to see our shame."

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

"My daughter, the good Lord works mysteriously. The boy is still young. We must try to have charity, to understand—"

"Understand? Such a thing as this? To run away; to become a tramp, a thief; to be put in prison. . . . And then after he is in prison—who can understand that? For a week, they say, he will not talk, will not answer a word, nothing. And when finally he gives a name it is not mine, not his own mother's, but this Monsieur Chariol's. It is from this teacher, this outsider, that I must learn what has happened to my son."

Father Lacaze began to speak, but again he was interrupted. This time it was by quick footsteps on the stairs, and the girl Yvette ran into the room. "They're coming, *Maman!*" she cried. "They're just down the street."

Father Lacaze rose quickly. "Ah, he is home then; that is good. So I shall go now. It is best that the first meeting be only with the family. But I shall talk to him later, I promise you. I shall talk to him from the heart."

He made a sign of blessing, took his hat and went out. Yvette ran to the window and looked down. "There are four of them," she said. "Claude and Felix and Monsieur Chariol and a policeman. They're all coming in. . . . No, Monsieur Chariol is leaving. . . . Oh, *Maman*, how Claude looks!"

Again there were footsteps on the stairs. Madame Morel stood facing the door.

Then Claude appeared, and behind him a man in uniform. Claude's hair was long and matted. His cheeks were thin, almost sunken; his eyes like blue stones, hard and opaque.

Mother and son stood without speaking. Then she nodded to Felix and Yvette. "You will go," she said sharply, "and take care of the store."

The policeman stepped forward and cleared his throat. "You are Madame Natalie Morel?" he asked. "This is your son?"

"Yes."

"I am a special officer attached to the Préfecture of the Ninth Arrondissement of Paris. My instructions are to turn

THE DAY ON FIRE

this boy over to your custody." The policeman produced two documents. "This is the record of arrest and sentence," he said, "of which you have already been sent a summary." He put down the first paper and held out the second. "And this is an acknowledgment of transfer of custody, which you will please sign."

Madame Morel took it from him and read it slowly and carefully. "There is an error," she said. "It gives the effective date as August fifth and today is the eighth."

"The form was made out several days ago. Then there were delays."

"Why were there delays?"

"There is, as Madame may have heard, a war on. Most of the trains are being requisitioned. Our troops are moving on Berlin."

"I shall change the date."

"You may if you wish."

Madame Morel took a pen from a drawer, changed the date, and signed her name.

"A copy of this," said the policeman, "will be filed with the Chef de Préfecture of Cambon. You will be responsible to him for the boy's conduct."

She inclined her head very slightly. "If you have now completed your duties, you may go," she told him.

The policeman started out the door. Madame Morel looked at Claude. Claude looked at the window.

"I have only this to say," she said at last. "That I have always done my duty as I see it, and that I shall continue to do so."

The boy was silent.

"And you—what do you have to say?"

He was still silent.

"You have nothing to say?"

Claude looked at her. "No, nothing," he said.

He walked past her, out the door and down the hall. She watched him as he opened the door of his room, went in, and closed it.

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

Father Lacaze chose his words carefully.

"It is not simply a matter of outward actions, of right and wrong, my son," he said quietly. "It is a matter of inwardness, a question of grace. Our Lord is merciful. He is understanding. He understands that His children are weak; that they will err and sin; and He will always forgive them if they truly seek forgiveness. If they truly repent of their sins and wish in their hearts to regain the state of grace."

He paused again. Thus far the boy had said nothing.

"Come with me now," the priest said. "We will go into the confessional and you will bare your heart to God."

Claude did not move.

"You will not come?"

Claude shook his head.

"Why not?"

"Because I can't."

"You have sinned, have you not?"

"I suppose so."

"Suppose? No, you know it. You are still young. In your heart, I am sure, you are good. But you have sinned. You are a sinner. I have known you all your life, Claude. With my own hands, in this very church, I baptized you. With my own hands I gave you the wafer of your first Communion. Since you were a little child six or seven years old your mother has seen to it that you have never missed a Mass, and I have been confident that you would always be a true son of our Father and His Church."

"Yes, of course," said Claude. "Hurrah for the Jesuits!"

"The Jesuits?"

"The Jesuits say, 'Give us the child before he is seven, and we will never lose him.'"

There was another silence. Father Lacaze stood up. "We have talked enough," he said. "Come."

"No, Father."

"You will not confess?"

"No."

THE DAY ON FIRE

"You will defy your church? You no longer believe in God?"

"Yes, I believe in God. At least I *think* I believe in Him. But I no longer believe in any cult."

It was no longer pain in the priest's face. It was sudden red anger. "Cult? You dare to call the Holy Church a cult?"

"I will go now, Father," said Claude quietly.

"Yes, go!" The old man almost trembled with emotion. "That I should live to see a thing like this! A boy I have known so long—of good family, of the best upbringing—now a thief, an unrepentant thief—and a blasphemer. . . . Yes, go! Go home to your mother, whom you have caused so much grief, and beg her forgiveness. Go home and look into your heart and ask God for *His* forgiveness. And when you have done that—no sooner—then you may come back here to this holy church."

The boy had started to go, and now he followed him, struggling to control his feelings. "Claude, Claude," he said, again gently, "think what you have said. What you are doing. Only stop and think and go home and pray, and I know you will see—"

He stopped. They had reached the church steps; the boy had turned and was looking at him; and he could scarcely look back at what he saw in his eyes.

"Goodbye, Father," said Claude, and went down the steps.

Behind him, the priest made the sign of the cross.

(())

He walked. He walked. That day, and the next, and the next. Every day for a month, and often on into the night. He walked in the town and in the country; along the roads, beside the river, through the fields and the forest. He loved walking—as he loved the sun and the sky.

His mother tried to keep him from leaving the house. What her conversation with Father Lacaze had been, or what decisions had been arrived at, he did not know; but it made no difference, for he was now too big to be held back physically and was no longer afraid of her tongue and her anger. Sometimes,

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

when she stormed at him, he too got angry and shouted back; but more often he ignored her. Sometimes, when she had been quiet and not bothered him, he worked for a while in the store, but never when she ordered him to. He did not go back to the church to see Father Lacaze, nor even to Mass.

Tardily, but now quite suddenly, he had begun to grow. His face was still that of a boy, fresh-skinned and small-featured, but his frame was becoming long and angular.

He read voraciously—as he had since he was scarcely more than a baby. Already he was familiar with all the classics of French literature, plus many from the German and English (not to mention the Latin and Greek), and now he read them a second and third time, as well as such new books as he could get from Chariol or elsewhere. He read novels, dramas, essays, history, biography, philosophy, sociology. He read Hugo, Balzac, Byron, Heine, Schopenhauer, Darwin, Marx. He read the poetry of the currently popular group of writers who called themselves the Parnassians, for the enjoyment he derived from his violent dislike of them; and he read the verse of Charles Baudelaire, whom he had just discovered, and who filled him with an almost magical excitement. When he could find books nowhere else, he went to the public library, prowling the stacks and shelves like a hunter in a forest; but the attendants were stuffy and pompous civil servants who, more often than not, would refuse him what he wanted, because he was “too young for it.” Great as was his love for books, and for the life and wonder that he found in them, he yet grew to hate the dust-dry bloodless boredom of the reading rooms and the creaking pedants who haunted them. *Les Assis*, he called them. The Sitt-downers . . .

He walked. And walked. He walked beside the River Meuse, his thoughts lost in its coiled yellow flow. He sat on its bank and wrote a few lines; then rising, skirted a pasture, crossed a road, and entered the woods. This was untouched timberland: the dark forest of the Ardennes, the wildest region in northern France. *Le Pays des Loups*, it was called. The Wolf Country.

THE DAY ON FIRE

And cautious people avoided it. But for Claude it had been refuge and sanctuary for many years, the nearest to a true home he had ever had. He had been no more than seven or eight when he had first come there, running away from his mother, moving deeper and deeper into the shadows, expecting at any moment to see the wolves around him, their teeth glinting, their eyes like yellow lanterns in the gloom. And later he had come many times, dozens and scores of times over the years: running away again, running from Cambon, running from school, church, home, mother, searching for his father who was gone and lost. . . .

He had only dim recollections of his father. He remembered that he was tall, that his voice was deep, that he was blond and fair-skinned like himself. And he remembered his uniforms, for his father was a soldier—an officer. Piecing together the fragments he had heard (from his brother, an uncle, older townspeople, but not his mother—never so much as a word from his mother), he knew that his parents had met while his father's company was stationed in Cambon on garrison duty; that they had been married against the wishes of his mother's parents, who had had a prosperous grain merchant picked out for her; and that their actual time together as husband and wife had been very brief. For his father's soldiering had not kept him long in Cambon. He had been sent to the south of France, then to Morocco and Algeria, to which, Claude gathered, his mother refused to accompany him, and from which he returned only on long-spaced leaves. From the last leave, when Claude was six, the boy could recall just two things. One was the three stripes on his father's blue sleeves, which showed that he had been made a captain. And the other was a terrible fight. He had had no idea, of course, of what the fight was about, but every detail was vivid in his memory: Felix and himself crouching by the open door (Yvette, too young, was asleep in her crib); the voices rising to shouts, the rage blazing from eyes, his father's face growing redder, his mother's whiter and whiter; finally his spitting a curse at her (it was the first



JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

time he, Claude, had heard the word *merde*), and her seizing a pewter bowl from the table and throwing it at him, and the bowl missing and crashing against the wall.

After that leave his father had never returned. He vanished. It was as if he had never been. Soon after, his mother had taken to wearing only black, and she began to be known in Cambon as the Widow Morel. But whether she ever really became a widow or not, no one could be sure.

Tall, straight, and black, his mother marched them to church in single file: Yvette first, himself second, Felix third, mother fourth. At first he had liked church; more than liked it—loved it, thrilled to it. The panoply of the Mass, the color, music, and solemn ritual had sent his child's mind soaring off on its first voyages of imagination. But as time passed there had been a slow change. The "march of the damned," as he came to call the family procession, grew progressively more humiliating and unbearable; and in the church itself, the prayers and liturgies, the endlessly repeated round of Masses, confessionals, and Communions seemed to him less and less a communication with a living God and more and more the playing out of an empty pageant.

At school it had been much the same: at first the excitement of new horizons; later dullness and routine. But he did not reject learning as he rejected religiosity. He consumed it, gorged on it. Except for mathematics and the sciences, everything came easily to him, and soon he was skipping classes. In languages he was particularly adept. At ten he could speak fluent English, at twelve fluent German and fair Italian as well. He could not only read Latin and Greek; he could talk them, write them; and when he was thirteen, and in the fourth form, a two-hundred-line poem he had composed in Latin hexameters, in the style of Horace, was entered in a national scholastic competition and won second prize (the first prize winner having been a university student of twenty-one). His mother, whose inner iron comprised ambition no less than discipline, brought herself painfully to the point of dipping into her cash

THE DAY ON FIRE

drawer to pay for after-hour private tutoring—which pushed him still further along. And for himself he earned the only pocket money he had ever had by, in turn, tutoring his classmates.

Learning and books he loved. But routine and pedantry he hated. And in the past three years, at least, school had become brighter through the coming of Albert Chariol. The long hours they spent together reading, talking, exploring the world of ideas and of each others' minds, were the fullest and richest the boy had known.

He was miserable when it came time to leave and go home. He had always hated the prim, arid, dismal rooms above the store. Within the family, companionship and communication scarcely existed. His brother was too stupid; his sister, though he was very fond of her, too young to share his thoughts.

He lived alone. He had never had a room to himself, nor a day's or night's privacy, yet he had still, all his life, lived alone. While his brother Felix, a bare arm's length from him, grunted and slept, he would wrap himself into his own world, into his books and writing, his thoughts and dreams. Once, when he had been much younger, he had found a strip of canvas in a dump and, bringing it home, used it as a spread when he was reading on his cot. The canvas was a sail. Stroking it with his fingers, he could almost feel the encrusted salt of distant seas. He could almost see it bellying out above him, sun-gleaming, wind-struck, as it carried him outward toward unknown shores.

His mother interrupted. She nagged and scolded. But he slowly trained himself to ignore her, rather than waste his time by fighting back. He developed the stratagem of locking himself in the privy and became adept at leaving and re-entering the house when her attention was occupied elsewhere.

With his schoolmates, as with his family, there was a wall, a barrier. The nearest he had had to a close friend was Michel Favre, but in the past year even they had been drifting apart. Michel was absorbed in facts, things, people; the events of day to day; above all, he was now absorbed in girls.

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

So Claude was alone. He was alone because he was different. He knew that. A few days before he had taken pencil and paper and tried to describe himself, and he had written: *I have the blue-white eye of my Gallic ancestors, their narrow skull, and their clumsiness in fighting.* And perhaps that was it, or part of it. That he was a throwback, a sort of genealogical sport: not a nineteenth-century Frenchman at all, but a wanderer from an older freer age, born out of his time into a world he was not made for.

Into a world of churches. Of Women. Of lie piled upon lie in the name of civilization.

All right, he was different. He was the queer one. The outcast, the vagabond, the voyager on strange seas. He saw things that others did not see; thought and felt things that were beyond their imaginings. Most of all he was different because the others—whatever was within them, whatever the truth beneath the lies and pretenses—kept it locked away and hidden, whereas he could not rest, could scarcely live and breathe, unless he poured them out in words. They were words, he already knew, to which few would listen—or, listening, understand.

I am I, he wrote, and the prisoner of my flesh. But I have also been others, elsewhere. A villein, I have made the journey to the Holy Land; my head is full of roads through the Swabian plains, views of Byzantium, ramparts of Jerusalem. From these a thousand memories stir. A leper, I am seated among potsherds and nettles at the foot of a sun-eaten wall. Later, a knight, I have bivouacked under German stars. I have danced the witches' sabbath in a red clearing with old hags and the children of werewolves. . . .

(())

The images flowed into him. In a tide, a flood—wildly. The images swelled, multiplied, thronged in on his brain: glowing, gleaming. Then they faded, and he pushed his paper away. Cambon returned. The world returned. Out in the world, be-

THE DAY ON FIRE

yond the town, France struggled and seethed. Napoleon the Little was gone, and with him his Empress and his Empire; but the war went on, and in Paris was a new Government of National Defense. There were battles, skirmishes, marches, countermarches, advances, retreats. But mostly, for the French, retreats. Now the Germans were moving quickly toward Paris; they swarmed over northern France, and it seemed that only the Ardennes was free of them.

No Germans came. Cambon, apparently, was not worth the bother. But finally, as summer passed into autumn, there were some signs of the war. Food began running short, troops shuttled in and out, and in October it was announced that the lycée would not reopen because the building was to be used as a military hospital. No school was fine with Claude; educationally he had gone far beyond anything it could give him. But its closing cut down his day-to-day outward life to even drearier limits than before: to home and store, mother and sister. His brother Felix was in the army. Monsieur Chariol was also away. With Felix gone, he at last had a room to himself; and he devised a way of jamming a chair against the door so that his mother could not come in unless he moved it.

He read. He thought. He wrote. He wrote slowly and carefully, in his small fine hand; then scratched out and discarded and revised and rewrote, striving always to "find a tongue," searching endlessly for the exact word, the exact color and tone, that could alone bring outward life to inward vision. For years, already, he had worked at the technique of writing. He had tried all manner of verse forms. He had experimented with meter, rhyme, alliteration, onomatopoeia; with all the skills and traditions of the poet's craft, until he was able to use them as he pleased. Now, however, he was no longer interested in forms and techniques, and least of all in tradition. They were prison walls, and he scaled them. They were rubble, and he threw them away. All his concentration, his dedication was to the expression of the inward; of what lay within himself—and himself alone.

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

*From the same desert, in the same night, he wrote, always
my tired eyes awake to the silver star, always; but the Kings of
Life are not moved, the three Magi, mind and heart and soul.
When shall we go beyond the mountains and the shores, to
greet the birth of new toil, of new wisdom, the flight of tyrants,
of demons, the end of superstition, to adore—the first to adore
—Christmas on the earth?*

He thought often of Christmas. Of the Mass of Christ, the birth of Christ, the birth of hope and love. And then he thought of the other Christmas, the holidays in Cambon, the cold, the grayness, the pinched pious faces, his mother leading the march to church. He, Felix, and Yvette had never had a celebration or a gift for the holidays. "Those are for rich people," his mother had said. "And for godless people. For the poor and decent, Christmas is praying in church—not heathen fripperies and red ribbons."

His birthday—the sixteenth—came and went, and there were no gifts then either. But at sixteen he was no longer concerned with such things. And besides he had found, for himself, something far better. This was a slim volume of verse by a poet named Maurice Druard, which by unlikely chance had made its appearance on the musty shelves of the Cambon library. The poems reminded him of Baudelaire's, but of a younger, fresher, even more daring Baudelaire who had gone on from *Les Fleurs du Mal* to still more exquisite renderings of cadence and imagery. The book told nothing of the author; but he was young, Claude was sure of that—perhaps not a great deal older than himself—for in every page, almost every line, he found vibrations and echoes that were his own, no less than Druard's. "This man is my brother," he thought. "More than a brother: almost a part of me. Someday I must meet him, know him, share my heart with him."

Meanwhile he read and reread—bewitched. His mind moved on from Druard's fantasies to his own. Working with a concentration he had never before attained, he wrote a half dozen new

THE DAY ON FIRE

pieces: some in verse, some in prose. And when he had finished, another new thing happened to him, for he found that he was no longer content simply to push his work into a table drawer. Selecting his favorite among the Parisian literary magazines he had seen at the library, he put his new pieces in an envelope, filched postage money from his mother's cash drawer, and sent them off. The next day the envelope came back. Paris had been cut off by the Germans, and no mail was going through.

Paris was not only cut off, but surrounded and besieged, and the siege dragged on through the fall and early winter. The Government of National Defense had withdrawn to Tours.

For the first time in many years, the political left was up and stirring, and one heard the words "Commune" and "Communard." There were demands for peace, demonstrations by factory workers, who were banding together into an organization called *les blouses blanches*. All reports from the city indicated that, behind the defense against the Germans, an even more bitter internal struggle was brewing. A struggle of workers against employers, poor against rich, ruled against rulers. A struggle that might soon be revolution.

As the weeks wore on, Claude became increasingly aware of all this. Slowly he surfaced from his pool of dreams, and, putting away his paper and pencils, devoured all the news he could find about the changing pattern of events. For this, unlike the war itself, was a thing that fired his sympathy and imagination: not a clash of state against state, power against power, in another of Europe's endless wars of unreason, but a true upsurging of right against wrong, of oppressed against oppressor. He had long since read the great romantics, the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment. And he believed with them in their sort of future: in *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, in the rights and brotherhood of man. Most of all, with the vehemence of his sixteen years, he believed in anything that was against the bourgeoisie, against the gods of his mother and of Cambon,

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

against authority and hierarchy and orthodoxy and the *status quo*. In 'thirty and 'forty-eight the risings had been crushed; liberty had drooped, reaction risen again. But this time, if the rising-up came, perhaps the end would be different. He, Claude Morel, wanted to be part of it. He *would* be part of it, a fighter in a cause that was *his* cause, with the dedication of the three Magi that were mind, heart, and soul.

(())

Christmas. Christmas on earth. The silver star burned brightly, and the Magi walked the night.

At four in the morning Claude left his room and went softly downstairs into the store. Going to the cash drawer, he opened it (his mother had of course hidden the key, but he had found it) and by the light of a candle counted the contents. It was about eighty francs. He did not take it all; he took twenty francs—one fourth of it—for he was one fourth of the family, and this was his Christmas gift. Stuffing the bills in his pocket, he went out the back door, over the familiar wall, into the streets. A few minutes later he was out of town, on a country road.

In Reims he was picked up as a vagrant and spent three days in jail. Often he was cold; usually he was hungry; but always, somewhere, somehow, found enough food to keep him going.

Very soon he had come to occupied France, and there were German troops everywhere. But there were civilians everywhere, too, and no attention was paid to him. As he again walked the streets of Paris his step was firm, his head high, and in his thoughts were the lines of another poet, and a great one—Heinrich Heine. . . . *Whether my songs are praised or blamed,* he had said, *matters little to me; but on my grave lay a sword,* for I was a soldier in the war for the liberation of man.

(())

But he was not long in discovering that Paris was not the same as before. Winter and siege together had taken their toll, and

THE DAY ON FIRE

he moved through streets that were the mere ghosts of what they had been six months before. From old habit he turned his steps back toward the Seine, and the bridges, but now the vaults under the arches were deserted, and he knew that if he tried to spend the night there he would freeze to death. Going on toward the center of town, he followed his vagabond's instincts, searching for the haunts of other vagabonds, and presently found them in a tangle of squalid streets behind Les Halles. Here, block after block, was an array of decrepit establishments that, for a minimal fee, provided shelter and food of sorts to the city's flotsam; and having still a few francs left from his raid on the cash drawer, he selected one called the Hôtel de Babylone and went in. For twenty centimes he was given a bowl of soup and a piece of black bread, and for another twenty the use of a burlap pallet on a stone floor.

Signs of the war and the siege, of ferment and crisis, were everywhere: in the littered streets, the uncared-for buildings, the grim-faced crowds, the very tension in the gray winter air. And soldiers were everywhere—more soldiers than he had ever seen: infantry and artillery, hussars and lancers, guardsmen in horsetail helmets, Zouaves in kepis and baggy pants, soldiers singly and in pairs and in squads and in troops, standing guard, marching, riding, deploying, scouring the streets in *moblots*, or flying patrols. But these were not the ones he was seeking. These were the regular army, the tools of the rulers, the servants of reaction.

Meanwhile he was running out of money. The most respectable of the available occupations available to him was ratcatching. There were at the Hôtel de Babylone, however, professional beggars, panhandlers, pickpockets, housebreakers—and with these too, in time, Claude became involved.

Time passed. The winter wore on. He didn't read. He didn't write. He scarcely lived, but simply existed—and waited. The war ended. Stillness descended on the guns and on the city, broken only by the thump of boots as the conquerors marched down the Champs Elysées, across the Place de la Concorde.

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

Paris watched with stone faces. Paris watched in silence. And when the Germans were gone, the silence remained: growing, swelling . . .

Until it exploded.

Out of the suburbs they came at last; out of the warrens, the tenements, the factories, the alleys, the slums. The people of Paris, marching. The *blouses blanches*. The Communards. Red posters appeared everywhere. Red flags flew—and beside them the tricolor—while trumpet and drum rolled out the *Marseillaise*. And down the streets they came, by the ten and the hundred thousand; down the boulevards, across the squares, through the parks; to the center of the city, to the halls of power. The National Guard joined them—by the company, the troop, the regiment—and when the government ordered them to disband and lay down their arms, they roared their defiance. Arsenals were raided. Barricades went up. Gunfire sounded and fires blazed through the streets.

Claude was a part of the crowd, his eyes shining, his heart all but bursting with excitement and joy. For here and now, at last, was what he had come for, what all France had been waiting for—the rising of the people, the march of the people. The crowd welcomed him, enveloped him. All men were brothers. As brothers they marched shoulder to shoulder into the Place de la Bastille and stood in close-packed ranks of thousands while the new leaders hurled defiance at the old. Gun barrels glistened. Torches flared. Clenched fists shot upward. And when the speakers had finished a roar rose that seemed to shake earth and heaven.

"Vive la liberté! Vive la Commune!"

He was a child of words, and the words reeled in his brain. . . . *Vive la Commune! Vive la liberté! Princes, lords, tyrants, perish! Cry freedom! Cry blood! Blood and the golden flame.* . . . And the flames glared; the rifles cracked, and within him the reeling grew wilder, it was itself like flame, like music, and exultation of doing, of fighting, of being. It swelled, brightened, blazed. . . . And stopped.

Everything stopped. Everything was suddenly gone.

THE DAY ON FIRE

Not one but two Claude Morels returned from Paris to Cambon, and the outward one was not prepossessing. During the months past he had kept growing, until he was now almost of normal man's height; but he seemed even taller, because of his thinness and gawkiness. His features were still fine-cut and boyish—whatever had happened to him otherwise had not touched him there—but there was the beginning of a beard on his cheeks, and he had let his hair grow until it hung wild and disheveled over his ears and forehead. Once erect in his posture, he now walked with an indolent slouch. And though his mother, reluctantly, had bought him a new jacket, he never wore it, preferring the oldest clothes he could lay his hands on, and, most especially, the remains of the old serge suit, out of which his arms and legs protruded like a scarecrow's. "I am a *beau gosse* fallen upon evil days," he would explain to anyone who commented.

He wandered the streets. He sat on the curbs. He walked into the fields, into the forest. Again he moved down the dark aisles and sat on the moss beneath the great trees; and again his mind went back to how he had come as a small boy, alone, to this *pays des loups*; how he had sat under these same trees, watching for wolves, waiting for them, waiting for their eyes, like yellow lanterns, to close in around him through the shadows. He had not been afraid of them then. When they came, he had been sure, they would not hurt him; they would accept him, know him for one of themselves. And now—now who knew beasts better than he? The wolves of the Ardennes. The wolves of Paris. The wolves of street, jail, flophouse, barracks. . . .

"Yes, the wolves," he thought. "And I am one of them."

Or if not a wolf, the nearest human counterpart. A Hun, an ancient Hun, one of the dark hordes from the wastes of Asia. Yes, it was not from the Gauls that he had come. It was from the Huns, the Scourges of God. It had been only a few miles away, at Châlons-on-the-Marne, that the great wave of Attilia's horde had broken at last on the parapets of Europe; and from the remnants of that invasion, strangers and outcasts, barbarians among the civilized, had come his ancestors—and himself.

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

His whole life was a running. From home and mother, school and church, from Cambon, from Paris, from everyone and everything.

His mother pounded on the door. One night she pounded longer than usual, and at last he opened it. "School begins tomorrow, and you will go," she told him.

"No, I won't," he said.

And he didn't.

But a few days later, he did. He went there in the afternoon and sat on the curb at the main entrance as his old classmates came out. "What are you up to?" they asked him. "I'm taking a postgraduate course," he told them, "—in how to be the town tramp."

Even a tramp, however, needed money occasionally, and, his mother's cash drawer being now under double lock—and general thieving overly hazardous—he fell back on his old part-time profession of tutoring. GUARANTEED PASSING GRADES—ONE FRANC PER SEMINAR; GUARANTEED HONORS—TWO FRANCS, he announced on hand-printed cards that he passed around.

He sat on the curbs. He wandered the streets. He was the town tramp and vagabond. *Le Voyou*, the Cambonards called him. The loafer. The hoodlum. And he did his best to live up to the title.

His clothes got still older and dirtier. His hair grew still longer and wilder. "If it's a *voyou* they want," he thought, "I'll give them the real thing." He wore an old German helmet which he had topped with a chicken feather, and from a dump he had salvaged a cracked meerschaum pipe the size of a trumpet. Blowing clouds of smoke, he sat on the curbs and street corners of the town, surveying the bourgeois world around him like a derelict king.

Increasingly now, he saw nothing but what he wished and willed to see: the images and visions of his inward eye. The world knew him as a *voyou*, a ne'er-do-well, and that was that; but he himself was aware that he was also in the process of becoming something else—something that, ironically, sounded

THE DAY ON FIRE

like it, and was in a strange way related to it—and this was a *voyant*—a seer. It was not a thing he imagined. It was a thing he knew. And it was not an accident, nor a spontaneous development, but the result of deliberate and conscious effort: a determination to turn his thoughts, his mind, his very soul, into the path that he had chosen for them. Slowly and painstakingly, struggling with each word and phrase, ransacking the depths of being, he set down his creed: . . . *I say that one must be a seer, make oneself a seer. The poet makes himself a seer by a long, immense and reasoned derangement of all the senses. He seeks in himself every kind of love, of suffering, of madness; he exhausts all the poisons in himself in order to keep only their quintessences.*

Derangement—*reasoned* derangement: that was the key. To break the mold, the chains, the bars that held the flesh and the spirit; to throw off the blinds, the slings, the splints, and trusses with which life binds us; to derange and twist and destroy the whole fabric of the prison, and to emerge whole and free. He was not afraid to be free—nor to find his own way to freedom. He was not afraid of “queerness” and “difference,” of apartness and aloneness, of ranging beyond the bounds which men set for themselves—into fantasy and hallucination, rapture, and ecstasy. As a *voyou* (for this was part of it—the seen, the outward) he must pledge himself to the rejection of all forms, all rules and customs, all mindless conformity and acquiescence. And as a *voyant* he must push on forever outward, forever expanding his experience and consciousness; seeing clearly, with fresh eyes; seeing beyond the veils, beyond the shams and effigies, beyond illusion and lie, to the truth.

The truth was not always pleasant. Sometimes it was in the eyes of a child or in a bird on a treetop, sometimes in a gutter, on a gallows, in a barracks latrine; and it was no less the truth in one place than in another. The dedication was to find it in all places—everywhere. To face it, know it, and be unafraid. Without evil, there could be no good; without filth, no purity; without hell, no heaven; without Satan, no God. To be saved

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

you must sin; to be blessed you must be damned; to be healed you must be sick; to live you must die. And most surely of all was this true for the poet—the seer.

It was not an issue of good and evil; but of the truth.

(())

The *voyant* lived in solitude. When Claude left his room—the moment he was in contact with another human being—he was transformed into the *voyou*. But his *voyou* habits were now changing. He had come to the point where he needed a new field of action; and he found it in the cafés.

There were, of course, problems involved, for without his tutoring income he was again penniless, and the proprietors expected an outlay of at least a few centimes for the privilege of sitting at their tables. But his ingenuity was well up to the challenge. Recalling the *chansonniers* of Montmartre, he adopted the same technique. For his public appearances he composed *vers impromptus*: a stream of ditties, jingles, and limericks, all of them bawdy, many whole-hog obscene.

He became known as a “character”—*un type*—and at one place in particular, the Café du Printemps, he was soon established as a fixture.

Claude played his role conscientiously. He declaimed, argued, clowned, hurled insults. And soon drinks were coming his way without his having to ask for them, on the theory of many in his audience that he put on an even better show when drunk. Indeed, few nights now passed on which he was not drunk—and he gloried in it. For it was fitting not only to a *voyou* but to a *voyant*, another form of liberation of the mind and the senses.

Among the regulars at the Printemps was the fattest man in Cambon, Fernand Archambault. Every evening of the week, he was to be found enthroned on two chairs (for one could not hold him), holding discourse by the hour. He knew as many stories as Scheherazade, and told them better, with a rich scatological overlay. But his clown’s mask, the boy presently

THE DAY ON FIRE

discovered, was like his own, too—a mask and no more. For, beneath it, Monsieur Archambault was a remarkable man.

This revelation came to Claude through (of all things) a sleight-of-hand demonstration. Archambault, among his sundry other roles, was an amateur magician; he often amused himself by bringing cards, balls, rings, and other paraphernalia to the café for the mystification of his fellow drinkers; and one night, after an exhibition, he left the place with Claude. "They are *salauds*, these friends of mine," he announced suddenly. "And they have the brains of hamsters. Not that they can't understand my little tricks; that means nothing. But that they can't even understand what a trick *is*—what magic *is*; that is depressing. Would you like me to tell you what it is? No? Well, I'll tell you anyhow. Magic is life. And do you know why? Because life itself is legerdemain, prestidigitation, illusion, hallucination."

Claude looked at him curiously. This was not the way people talked in Cambon.

"You, of course, are a *salaud*, too," said the fat man. "A brat, a hoodlum, and a disgrace to your parents—whoever they are. But I don't think you're a hamster." He eyed Claude sharply, as they stopped in front of a small house. "You write, don't you?"

"How do you—"

"I can tell. The disease is all over you—like pockmarks. . . . Very well, you write. If you write you deal in magic. You deal in the most magical abracadabra ever devised by man of God: the abracadabra of words. I was a writer once, God help me. A very bad writer, but still I had the disease. . . . Come in and I'll show you my magician's lair."

What Claude expected to find he could not have said. Some sort of laboratory, perhaps. But what he did find was something very different. What he found were books. Books by the scores and hundreds, lining the walls and crowding the tables of the tiny room that Archambault had made his study; old books and new books, French books and foreign books,

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

strange and rare and exotic books, such as he would never have dreamed existed in Cambon; and all of them, without exception, dealing with the magical, the mystical, the occult.

"If you want magic, boy," said Archambault, "here it is. Help yourself."

Claude did. During the weeks that followed he spent almost all his time with the new-found treasure. From this wealth of new discovery he came back to the men he had already known and revered—the seers and mystics of more recent times: de Maistre and Ballanche, Leroux and Enfantin, Poe and Baudelaire. He came back to Maurice Druard, the unknown whose poems he had found in the dreary library of *les assis*, and now, more than ever, he was his brother—his twin, a very part of his own being.

Then one night, on impulse, he took several of his poems and gave them to Archambault.

In the café the following evening, Archambault was in an expansive mood and hours passed before Claude could catch him alone. Even then, he seemed not disposed to speak of the poems, but instead kept Claude in misery with another of his disquisitions on magic. "Do you know what I'd have liked best of all to be in my life?" he said. "An alchemist! If I'd been lucky enough to live in the Middle Ages instead of this damned Age of the Bourgeois, I'd have been a second Faust!"

Claude squirmed in his impatience. Then it happened. Archambault looked at him with a curious expression, and added: "Of course your sort's lucky. You don't need the Middle Ages. You're an alchemist in any age. An alchemist of words."

Claude's heart leaped. "You mean you liked—"

"I don't know about 'liked.' It would be pretty hard to *like* the sort of stuff you write. But it's alchemy, boy—yes. It's got magic. What do you do with these things of yours? Who's seen them? Whom have you sent them to?"

"No one. That is—once I tried, with a magazine—but I wasn't successful."

"Hmm— Well, I have a suggestion. I'd like to send them to

THE DAY ON FIRE

someone in Paris. A chap I used to know there when I was trying to write myself. He was just a youngster then, but he's a poet and a good one. Name of Maurice Druard."

The leaping heart all but stopped. "Druard?"

"Yes, do you know him?"

Claude could scarcely speak. "I've never met him, of course—no. But I've read his poems—some of them—all I could find. I know them by heart. He's a genius!"

(())

Archambault was not just talking. Later, at his house, he put Claude's poems in an envelope and addressed it. Then he wrote a covering note, and Claude, with shaking hand, wrote another. *I am only a young writer, but I think the enclosed will show I am a true writer. I beg you to hold out your hand to me. Claude Morel.*

He went home. The night gleamed. The stars sang.

Druard . . . Druard . . .

The next morning he was at his table at dawn. And again he stayed there through the days and the nights. He worked as he had never worked before, fired twofold by the insights of his recent reading and the thought that, even as he worked, Druard, the great Druard, might be sitting over his poems and thinking of him. With all his intensity, all his mind and heart, he gave himself to the act of creation. He wrote with a passion, a frenzy, that was more demonic than human, and a dedication that was absolute. His goal was not merely to write poetry—even great poetry—as it had been written before, but to cast off every vestige of the literal and traditional, to follow his mystic masters into the unknown, to go on beyond them, into new, farther unknowns, into which he, of all men, would be the first to enter. The potential was there: that he knew. The visions and images were there, burning within him. The struggle, now fiercer than ever, was to find a tongue, a language, that could express them: a tool of art that would match the tools of science and technology—ever more powerful, more

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

delicate, more controlled, and yet more free—a mighty living force in the expansion of man's consciousness. To this end he took language apart and put it together again. He waged grim unceasing battle with words, phrases, grammar, syntax, and verse forms, striving to rebuild the whole fabric of expression to his desire and will. If he was to be what he dreamed of being—a thief of fire, the greatest of all thieves, all visionaries—he must first forge himself the perfect instrument in which that fire might burn.

"God, fill me with your light!" he prayed. "Hell, fill me with your flames!"

And both God and hell seemed to answer.

He became as one possessed. His blood boiled. His brain reeled. He was no longer Claude Morel, no longer the *I* of self, but *another*—a *voyant*, a seer—And out of this vision, this clairvoyance, he now wrote a poem which, before, he would not have dared to try: a poem of his soul and his soul's voyage.

Of all the memories of his early childhood, the clearest, the most magical, was that of a toy ship and a puddle . . .

*the cold black puddle where, under an evening sky,
a crouching child, full of sorrow, launches
a boat as frail as a May butterfly . . .*

And in the years since, it had not changed. It had only grown; the puddle into a sea, an ocean; the butterfly into a gull, an eagle, a fabulous frigate bird of the ocean sky. He himself was the bird, he himself the boat. And his poem was the story of that boat's voyage: out from the ports of home, from the parapets of Europe: He named his voyage: *Le Bateau Ivre*—*The Drunken Boat*.

The pitch of fever held. It sustained him, kindled him, until he had finished. But by then it had consumed him. He was written out, burned out, gutted. For two days and two nights he slept the sleep of the drugged, and even when he at last got up and left his room he felt as weak and hollow as a ghost. He walked. He walked out from the town and sat be-

THE DAY ON FIRE

side the River Meuse. He sat alone for hours deep in the forest of the Ardennes.

The summer days dragged on. Nothing came from Druard. His poems were lying on some shelf in Paris, discarded and forgotten—just as *The Drunken Boat* was lying in the drawer of his table.

He stopped going to the Printemps, because he could not bear to see Archambault. He stopped playing the *voyou* in public, because he no longer had the spirit for it. But inwardly he was now more the *voyou*—more the tramp and outcast—than ever. He walked through the dust aimlessly, going nowhere, a dusty ghost, a sleepwalker, caught in an evil dream.

And it was still as if in a dream that one day, in late summer, he entered the store and picked up the letter that lay on the counter; he climbed the stairs, went to his room, closed the door, and sat down at his table. He opened the envelope and a fifty-franc note fell out. He extracted a sheet of note paper, unfolded it, and began to read.

He read: . . . brilliant, magnificent . . .

He read: . . . have been away; I am sorry . . . we must meet as soon as possible . . . we have room and would be honored . . . enclosed is a little something. . . .

He read: . . . Come, dear great spirit. We call you, we await you! Yours in homage and admiration, Maurice Druard.

((3))

"*VOS BILLETS, s'il vous plaît. Vos billets!*" The guard at the gate extended his hand, and Claude gave him his ticket. ("No jump today," he thought. "No ties or gravel or bloody knee.")

Two weeks had passed since the first letter from Druard. Immediately upon receiving it he had run to Archambault—who had received one too—and then he had written back. Again Druard had replied. The invitation had not been a hollow

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

one; a firm date was set; and through the days that followed Claude had lived in a fever of anticipation.

Once again Paris enveloped him. Again he moved down the great boulevards, past the shops and cafés, through the evening crowds. His mind raced ahead to Druard's home, his arrival there, his welcome. The address was in Montmartre, on a street he did not know, but he had long since visualized it.

He stopped and looked around him in the gathering dusk. He was in Montmartre all right, and on the right street—the Rue Nicolet; but it looked like nothing he had ever seen in that *quartier*. It looked, rather like some of the streets he remembered from the western faubourgs, in the solid, stolid domain of the bourgeoisie. Puzzled, he pulled Druard's last letter from his pocket. *176 Rue Nicolet*, it said. And he went on. He came to a solid, stolid house of three stories. Mounting the steps, he pulled the bell.

A woman in a white apron and cap opened the door. "The delivery entrance is in the rear," she said. The door started to close.

"Doesn't Monsieur Druard live here?" asked Claude.

"Monsieur Druard?" The maid seemed surprised that he knew the name. "Yes, Monsieur Druard lives here, but he is not at home."

She again made as if to close the door, but was interrupted by a woman's voice behind her. "Is there some trouble, Jeanne?"

Claude pushed forward. "I want to see Monsieur Druard," he said.

Behind the maid he could now see the woman who had spoken. And there was another woman besides. The first was middle-aged, with strong, almost manlike features. The other was much younger—twenty or so, Claude judged—with a soft round face.

"What do you want of him?"

"I'm a friend. He's expecting me."

"Expecting—?" The two women looked at each other, then

THE DAY ON FIRE

back at Claude. "*Mon Dieu!*" said the older. "You are Monsieur—I mean, you are—"

"I am Claude Morel."

Both women's lips parted. Again they looked at each other and then back to Claude.

"Maurice—that is, Monsieur Druard—went out. He went to the station to meet you," the older woman finally said. "I am Madame de Bercy. Monsieur Druard is my son-in-law. This is my daughter, Monsieur Druard's wife."

Now Claude was staring as well as they, and his eyes moved around the foyer. On the right, double doors opened into a large, richly furnished parlor.

"This is Monsieur Druard's house?" he said slowly.

"It is my house," said Madame de Bercy. "My daughter and son-in-law are living with me. Won't you come in and make yourself comfortable?" she said. And the three of them went into the parlor and sat down.

There was still another silence. Claude looked at the Turkish carpet, the gilt Empire furniture, the white marble fireplace. Then the front door opened and a young man came in from the foyer. "Well—" he said. "Well, well!" Hurrying across the room, he grasped Claude's hand and held it. "I missed you, eh? I'm so sorry. But you got here all right—that's the main thing. You're here. Welcome, my friend. Welcome!"

He looked at Claude closely, and his face, like the women's, showed his surprise; but what followed was a quick smile and a warm hand on the boy's shoulder. "*Mon Dieu!*" he said, "*Comme il est enfant, ce génie!*"

Druard himself was about thirty. He was of medium height and slightly built, with a small, fine-featured face to which high cheekbones and slightly slanting eyes gave a certain oriental cast. "My boy, my boy!" he said, holding Claude close to him. "It's good to have you here. Good for me, for Paris, for all of us!"

He went on talking animatedly. He asked questions, told stories, brought in apéritifs and glasses.

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

There was the sound of steps from the foyer and a young girl came in. "Am I holding things up?" she said. "I'm so sorry."

A tall girl—almost as tall as Claude and Druard—she had a fresh-skinned, oval-shaped face, broadening to a full high forehead. Her mouth was soft and pliable, as if it smiled a lot. Her eyes were a deep gleaming, almost violet, blue.

"This is my wife's cousin, Mademoiselle Lautier," said Druard. "She's spending a few weeks with us while her parents are away."

Mademoiselle Lautier moved forward and extended a hand. "We have been hearing a lot about you," she said.

Claude mumbled something. The hand in his was as soft and fragile as a small bird.

"And I am happy to be here for your visit," she told him.

The maid appeared and announced dinner. They went into the gleaming dining room. "Here, if you please," said Madame de Bercy, indicating a place; and Claude sat down. She herself sat at the head of the table, on one side of him, and her daughter on the other. Druard and Mademoiselle Lautier took the seats opposite. The maid served soup and then a roast. Druard ate little, but kept draining and refilling his glass, and he refilled Claude's, too, whenever it was low.

Madame de Bercy turned to Claude. "You come from—er—Charbon, I believe Maurice said? In the Vosges? That interests me, you know. To be truthful, I had never associated the Vosges with an active cultural life. You are acquainted with the Parnassians, Monsieur Morel? They are today's leading poets, you know. Truly a group of geniuses."

The women's glasses were still full. Druard replenished Claude's and his own. "Here's to the Parnassians!" he toasted. "May they drown in their own syrup."

His mother-in-law bit her lip. "Maurice has such strong prejudices. Of course everyone is entitled to his opinion, but it does seem strange to me how anyone could dislike the Parnassians." She turned brightly to Claude. "And how do you

THE DAY ON FIRE

feel, Monsieur Morel? You wouldn't call their poems syrup, would you?"

"No, madame," said Claude. "I'd call them garbage."

Druard laughed. His wife and mother-in-law were silent. Across the table, Mademoiselle Lautier was silent too—indeed, she had said nothing since almost the beginning of the meal—but her eyes rested on Claude with a curious measuring fixity.

Claude drank his wine. His hand shook a little, and the sweat was thicker on his forehead. Putting his hand in his pocket, he felt his meerschaum pipe. He took it out, found a match and lighted up.

Madame de Bercy stood up. "I think we have had enough of this," she announced. "Come, Isabelle. Come, Germaine."

Mademoiselle Lautier looked after them but she did not rise. Druard drank down another glass of wine.

After a few minutes Madame de Bercy called from outside. "Maurice, you will come here please! You will come at once!"

Druard mumbled something under his breath; then got up slowly and went out. Claude's first impulse was to follow, but he didn't. He didn't know where to go or what to do. Defiantly he drew in deep from his pipe and blew the smoke out across the table. He glanced at the girl, who was watching him and then away again.

"I suppose you're quite proud of yourself," said Mademoiselle Lautier.

Again he looked at her, and again away. But he could feel the blue-violet eyes fixed on him, watching him.

"What are you afraid of?" the girl asked.

His glance flashed back at her. "I'm not afraid."

"If you're not afraid, why do you act this way? Showing off like a nasty child. How old are you?" she asked.

"What business is it of yours?"

"None. I'm just asking. I think you're"—she studied him—"sixteen. Why aren't you at school?" the girl asked.

"Why aren't you?"

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

"I am. I go to one in Passy, where I live. But my parents are away now, so I'm staying here with my aunt and cousin. Why aren't you at school?"

"I left more than a year ago."

"You don't approve of it?"

"No."

The girl was silent a moment. She sat very straight in her chair, her shoulders gleaming in the candlelight; and her eyes gleamed too, deep and tranquil, with perhaps the hint of a smile far within them.

"I think I know what you disapprove of most," she said. "And what you're most afraid of too."

"I'm not afraid of anything," Claude said defiantly.

"Yes you are. You're afraid of women."

Their eyes met somewhere in the candlelight.

"You hate women," she said. "Why?"

"Because—because they *are* women. Because they crush. They imprison. Because they hate the truth and worship lies. My mother is a woman, and I know what she has done to me. Druard lives with women, and I can see already how miserable they make him."

"Maurice makes himself miserable. He has an unhappy soul." The girl paused and seemed to lean forward a little. "So do *you* make yourself unhappy," she said. "Why? Must you be unhappy and full of hate to write your poetry?"

"What do you know about my poetry?" Claude said harshly.

"Maurice has let me see the things you sent him. I thought they were the most wonderful and exciting things I have ever read."

For a long moment Claude looked at her, and the violet eyes looked steadily back at him. He raised one hand a little and then lowered it. Words formed on his lips but remained unsaid.

There was a sound in the doorway, and Druard came in. His expression was tense, and he was passing a hand distractedly over the dome of his forehead.

THE DAY ON FIRE

"Come on, boy," he said to Claude. His voice was higher pitched than before—almost shrill. "Let's get out of here." He seized Claude's arm and all but propelled him through the door.

(())

For a few blocks they walked in silence; Druard kept passing a hand nervously across his forehead. Then gradually he began to talk. "There's only one piece of advice I can give you, boy," he said. "Don't marry money. For that matter"—his voice grated—"don't marry. For months I've been putting up with them—with their gabble and their emptiness and their imbecility—and all the while asking myself, 'Why do I put up with this? What am I doing here?' *Merde!*" he said. "*Merde* to all women. And double *merde* to women with money."

"I hadn't thought you'd be married," said Claude.

"No?" Druard made a sound that might have been a laugh. "Well, I hadn't thought so either—once. But I am, boy. I am. Look at me. Do you know who you're looking at? Judas, that's who. Judas Iscariot, who sold out for thirty pieces of silver."

He paused, then went on. "A poet doesn't make much money, boy; you'll find that out soon enough. And I'm no exception. Before I married I was a clerk. I worked in a government office, like our friend Archambault, and we were both trying to be poets. Only there was one difference between us: that he wasn't a poet, and I was. I am. I have talent. No, I'll go farther than that—I have genius. To you I can say that simply, and you will understand. It's not boasting or fantasy. It's a fact. One knows."

"Yes," said Claude, "one knows."

"Anyhow, there I was: by day a clerk, by night a poet. I had friends, good dear friends, but only men. No women at all; no damned entanglements with women. I was happy, but unfortunately I didn't know it. I thought I wanted more: money, position, all the rest of it. So—my family knew another family, and that family had a daughter—" He shrugged. "And here I

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

am. Something bought by a woman; fed and kept by a woman; without freedom, without self-respect, without even a home I can call my own."

"Haven't you ever tried to get out?"

"Tried? My God, yes. In my mind, every day, every hour. And a few times I've even done something: packed up, gone, disappeared. But—" Druard shrugged again. "But it isn't that easy, boy. I don't mean the money part of it; I mean—well—all kinds of things. Obligation, convention, what's expected of you—And sentiment. God damn sentiment!"

Their steps had taken them from the Rue Nicolet into the brighter side of Montmartre. Here, in every block, there were a half dozen cafés, and suddenly Druard took Claude's arm and pulled him into one. "Here's a man's world, boy," he said. "It's like living again just to see and smell it."

They sat at a corner table, and a waiter came.

"Absinthe," said Druard. Then he looked at Claude. "You like absinthe? Or perhaps you don't know it? . . . Ah, you must try it then. It's magic, green magic. The drink for poets—and prisoners. . . ."

The waiter left. Druard's eyes rested broodingly on the table. "Of course only one of us is a prisoner," he said. He looked up suddenly. "You are free. You are strong."

Claude smiled a little. "I've had my own prison days too."

"Yes, I'm sure you have. All men have had them. But you've had the strength and power to break out. It was plain to me, even before, from the poems you sent me—those wonderful free singing poems."

The waiter brought two glasses in saucers and set them down. "Well, here's to art," Druard said. "And to living. And to absinthe."

He went on talking. But now the talk was different. Sipping the drink of poets, he became the poet, with all else forgotten, banished, lost in limbo. He spoke of Claude's verses. He remembered each one of them, line for line, phrase for phrase, word for word, even as Claude remembered those of his which

THE DAY ON FIRE

he had read with rapture back in the dreariness of Cambon. His comments were sure, subtle, brilliant. They were by no means all praise. Some of the poems he found inferior, and said so, but even in his sharpest criticism there was a clarity, a perception and sensitivity, that gave light and not shadow—that did not offend or wound Claude, but rather deepened and illumined his understanding.

Two more drinks came. And two more. And still he talked, and Claude sat entranced. How much was the green magic of absinthe, and how much Druard's own magic, he didn't know; but it was such magic as Archambault, with all his alchemists, had never dreamed of.

(())

His friend. The very word haunted his thoughts and dreams. . . . Friend—*friend*—FRIEND. . . . For he had never had a true friend before. Not Michel Favre, not Chariol, not Archambault. Whereas Druard, through some magic of affinity, was already closer to him than he would have believed any human being could be. It had been so even before they met, through each other's writings, and now it was doubly so, tenfold, a hundredfold, in their companionship. "*Tu es mon maître*," said Claude. "I wasn't alive, I didn't dream what I could do, until I read your poems and felt your heartbeat." And Druard answered, smiling: "You didn't write *The Drunken Boat*, you know. I wrote it. The stronger, freer *I*—the *I* who is you." They held out their hands to each other: across a café table, across a gulf of loneliness.

Soon, Druard knew, the hateful house would no longer be "home." They would have a place of their own. Meanwhile he found Claude an attic room in the nearby Rue Fontard. Claude had worked in total solitude: the *voyant* alone with his visions, the dreamer closed in by his dreams. But now there was more than just himself. There was Druard. He came to the attic room every day. He stayed for hours. Often the two would write there together, sharing the table, each working on his

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

own verse, until the day's stint was finished, and then they would show each other what they had done; and from the alchemy of his own art, rare and exquisite, Druard passed on to Claude's qualities it had never before possessed.

They wrote. They read. They talked. They dreaded the hour of separation. And Druard loved the frowzy garret no less than Claude. "It's what I needed most all this time," he said. "Simplicity. Poverty. It is how God intended poets should live." Often he almost reached the point of moving in altogether, of making the final break with his wife and family. But never quite. Without his daily return to the Rue Nicolet there would have been no rent, no food, no drink, nothing.

Of their few expenses, that for drinks was by far the largest. For every night when their writing was over, and after Druard had gone home for a quick-as-possible dinner, they went out to the cafés and stayed out until they closed.

*Good pilgrims, let us seek
absinthe's green-pillared hall,* Claude wrote. . . .

And they sought it. They found it. Almost all of their time together, when they were not writing, they spent at small round tables talking and drinking; but even this, strangely, was not release from writing, not mere escape and debauchery, but a part of their enterprise and their communion; for from the talk came the thoughts and feelings that nourished them, and from the green magic came fresh dreams and visions.

Druard, too, dreamed dreams, saw visions, evoked beauty and passion from his heart and brain as if with a sorcerer's wand. But he had neither Claude's extreme youth nor strength. He could not fly so long, work so long. A poem finished, or sometimes only a stanza or a few lines, he would be drained, exhausted. Claude knew that he slept very little at home, that he spent his mornings as well as his dinners wrangling with the de Bercys; and again and again he urged Druard to move in with him. But this Druard would not do. Each evening at

THE DAY ON FIRE

seven, and each morning, however near dawn, he would return to the Rue Nicolet and the world he despised and hated.

Then the day came when he did not return. Druard had tried. *Mon Dieu*, how he had tried! He had put up with the autocracy of his mother-in-law, the malaises and megrims of his wife, and if it had gone on another day, he would have been ready for an asylum. . . .

And besides (it came out a bit later) there had been another development. His father had died. His father, a widower, had lived in Lyon; he had not seen him in years; he had almost forgotten he existed. But now the old man had died—and, incredibly, left a trust fund. It was no fortune, to be sure, but no pittance either. He, Maurice, would receive between seven and eight thousand francs a year. . . .

Druard was full of plans. There would be no more ridiculous double life for him, shuttling back and forth between the Rue Nicolet and the Rue Fontard, but only one life, the life he was made for. He and Claude would set up a proper ménage.

"The Left Bank, that's where we'll go," he declared. "*Le Quartier Latin*. . . . All the writing crowd has moved over; all my friends; we'll be at home there. . . . Yes, the Left Bank—and freedom!"

It was not just talk. In three days it had happened. They found a two-room, semifurnished apartment in the Rue de Lacque.

They worked. They talked. And as before, when evening came, they went out. Now the focus of their nights was the "Boul' Mich" and its radiating side streets, and in its cafés and bistros they drank their absinthes. As Druard had said, most of his writer friends had preceded them in migration to the *Quartier Latin*. The Parisian literary world was small, compact, and intense. Almost everyone in it knew everyone else. In this society within a society, Claude soon discovered, Druard was far from a stranger. Though not yet read by the general public (for he had been published only in limited editions,

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

financed by the de Bercys), he was much admired by many of the "insiders" and, even by those such as the Parnassians, who withheld admiration, considered a poet to be reckoned with.

Furthermore, Claude made a discovery far more startling and exciting, and this was that *he himself* was not unknown. And for this, he learned too, thanks were due to Druard. Even before his arrival his friend had circulated his poems, beaten the drum for him, hailed him to one and all as a certified genius; and now that they discovered he was no more than a boy, he became in short order a personality, a celebrity. "Aha, Druard's prodigy!" he was greeted. They talked of his poetry. They looked incredulously across the tables at his gangling figure in its army greatcoat; at his outsized pipe; at his dirty cherub's face, his wild yellow hair. And their eyes widened.

Claude soon widened them further. The graduate *voyou* of Cambon's Café du Printemps was no less in his element in the cafés of the Boul' Mich, and he played the part with new relish. He drank drink for drink with the grown men around him. He matched them word for word, opinion for opinion, argument for argument, and was not long in discovering that, with most of them, his were the sharper, deadlier weapons. Age and reputation fazed him not at all. Indeed, as back home, he particularly delighted in deflating the self-important, the pompous, the authoritarian. When patronized or challenged he dug casually into his scatological vocabulary and emerged with comments that left his listeners stiff with shock.

They talked. They speculated. They watched with fascination as he and Druard sat at a table behind their rising saucers. And they listened with fascination, however reluctant, when now and then, at a café, Claude pulled a new poem from his pocket and read it aloud in his clear boyish voice. For Claude himself these were the best moments. When he rose there was silence. There were turned faces, listening faces; even the hostile faces of those he had antagonized turned and listened intently, because they could not help it, because they were com-

THE DAY ON FIRE

pelled to listen by the power that was in him. He had power, he knew now, not only to create but to impose his will; not only over words on a page but over his fellow men.

Above all, he had power over Druard. And this, he realized, was not merely a matter of influence on his writing, but of his own self, his personality—and Druard's need of him. He was a youth of seventeen, his friend a man of thirty; yet their relationship, increasingly, was inverse to their ages, with himself the leader, the dominant partner, and the other the willing follower and colleague.

The core of their relationship, Claude further knew, was its sexuality—particularly insofar as Druard was concerned. For his friend, it was obvious, was a true, and precariously balanced, bisexual. Over the years, Claude gathered, he had had several such associations. All of them, however, had apparently been brief, and in none had there been even a fraction of the intensity of emotion which he now felt for Claude.

With Claude himself it was different, and he was profoundly aware of it. If his friend was bisexual, he, for his part, he was now convinced, was essentially nonsexual. What he needed—the one and only thing he needed and craved from life—was freedom. Freedom from both women *and* men. Freedom from his mother. Freedom from home and family, priests and teachers, restraints and conventions; from everyone and everything that could bind and imprison him. And this freedom, strangely, he was finding with Druard. For what, to the other, was emotional bondage was for him liberation.

Of all the aspects of their relationship, this was the most remarkable: that, for all its demands on them, all its excesses and aberrations, it nevertheless brought out in them their fullest power as poets. Out of their labors, their experience, their companionship, came poetry of depth and purity, beauty and splendor. What they had willed to happen *did* happen. In what they wrote was neither virtue nor sin, neither good nor evil. There was only art.

Claude was working on a series of short poems in verse and

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

prose to which he had given the over-all name *Illuminations*. And the name was right. For they were not poems in the conventional sense, but rather fragments, snatches, the glint of sunlight or the beam of a candle, touching emptiness with color, piercing darkness with light. Sometimes he wrote with hatred, sometimes with love. But always he wrote with passion, out of the pure flame in his heart.

(())

Winter came. Paris lay in mist and gray slush, and a thin wind blew over the hills and under the bridges across the Seine.

Claude's reputation as an *enfant terrible* was now secure, and for every one of the café crowd who resented and snubbed him there were a dozen who crowded around delightedly.

But, perversely too, this had another, and unforeseen, effect; for Druard, who in the beginning had so proudly exhibited him, now began to resent the impingement of outsiders. Claude was his protégé, his *génie magnifique*: he wanted that clearly understood. When others paid what he considered too much attention to him, he would sit in sulking silence or turn suddenly in waspish anger.

And, now more than ever, Claude himself became the apostle of unreason. He made statements and comments less because he believed them than because he knew they would shock or irritate, and when the absinthe was really at work on him he would go to almost any length to goad his listeners.

More and more now the two sat alone at their tables. Many of the café crowd began openly to avoid him, and when he approached treated him as a freak, *un type insupportable*, calling him The Drunken Boatman and The Hun of the Ardennes; and he would call them names in return—but with a richer vocabulary. And the time came, inevitably, when there were fights. The chip on his shoulder grew larger and larger; his restraint grew less and less. And the latter was by no means only a matter of drunkenness, for the rejection of restraint was

THE DAY ON FIRE

a matter of principle to him, the key tenet of his creed. At first Druard made certain efforts to control him. But they were feeble and feckless. For one thing, with his penchant for scenes and plate-smashing, he was no hand at controlling even himself; and beyond that, Claude was wholly unmanageable. He was the stronger of the two, and he knew it. The power that Druard had felt in him from the day of their first meeting had grown and intensified until it was now wholly dominant. He knew no fear, no qualms, no inhibitions. Above all, he knew no remorse—which Druard knew all too well. Where he led, Druard followed; at all he did, Druard marveled. He had called him Apollo, originally. Now he saw him as Lucifer as well. Not the old Lucifer—not Satan, the ancient incarnate evil of a theological hell—but the young Lucifer, the Light-bringer, the rebel angel: Lucifer defiant, Lucifer god of the possessed and dispossessed. . . .

Indeed, the time had now come when Claude truly believed he had broken all bars and shackles. One by one he had encountered the Seven Deadly Sins; he had not feared them but embraced them; and, in embracing, he had destroyed them. He had, by his own efforts, of his will and vision, cut down the Tree of Good and Evil, until it was no more than rotted wood under his feet. He had succeeded in his “reasoned derangement of the senses,” until they were free of the bonds that held the senses of others. He had found a tongue with which to speak. He became a thief of the fire from heaven. And if the fire at times burned so brightly that it almost consumed him, it was a thousand times worth the while, for the fire was the fire of truth.

“I will be a poet,” he had said. And he was.

“I will be a seer,” he had said. And he was.

And he was an alchemist too. Above all, an alchemist. Like Faust, he had sold his soul to the devil, but only that he might beat the devil at his own game—and not by weakness or repentance, but by his own greater strength.

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

Druard lived with him, beside him. He drank his absinthe, smoked his hashish, looked out through his own windows in search of his own truth. Claude knew that often, beyond those windows, there loomed a crucifix. He sat for hours staring blankly at the white paper on his desk, and then plunged into his writing. What he wrote was masterful, exquisite: a fusion of nuance and vision, passion and pain. But he could not write for long at a time. His shoulders would droop, his eyes grow blank again.

Then the night came when they decided to leave Paris.

It was raining that night when they left the café and Claude looked morosely up and down the street. "I hate Paris," he said. "It's always raining and nobody talks to you. I hate the rain and I hate Paris. Let's get the hell out."

"Yes—out. Fast. . . . But where to?"

"To the south. Away from the rain—into the sun."

"Because we're children of the sun."

"And the hell with Paris."

They walked on a while. Then they were in a fiacre. Then they were in a station. Then they were in a train. At the bar in the station they had bought a bottle of absinthe, and on the train they drank from it until they fell asleep.

When the conductor roused them it was morning. The train had stopped, and beyond the window was a dock and open water. "The blue Mediterranean!" Druard exulted. Only it wasn't blue. It was gray. It was raining.

"Beyond the mists," said Claude, "lies Carthage."

They got off the train and bought another bottle of absinthe. Then they saw a boat beside the dock and got on it, and the boat pulled out. They drank for a while on the boat, and then there was another dock, and they got off and into another train, and they drank some more on the train and fell asleep again, and this time, when they awakened, the conductor was calling, "London! London!"

"My God!" said Druard. "What have we done?"

THE DAY ON FIRE

But Claude only smiled and pulled out pencil and paper.
Forever arriving, he wrote, you will go everywhere. . . .

(())

"We'll go back tomorrow," Druard said.

But they didn't. They didn't go that week, or that month, or the next month, or for many months. . . . Instead, they found lodgings in Soho. Druard arranged for the income from his trust fund to be paid to him through a London bank. They bought the few clothes and other items they needed. They settled down as exiles.

But there were in exile, compensations. For Soho was, in most ways, more continental than British, and among the jumbled nationalities were many Frenchmen. Most of them were young; all were poor; all were Bohemian in their tastes, liberal to radical in their attitudes; and not a few were political refugees—veterans of the short-lived Commune who had had to flee France for their lives. Like Claude and Druard, they were outcasts, pariahs, rebels, and they accepted the newcomers as two more of their own kind.

For most of them, the strange Anglo-Saxon world beyond the bounds of Soho scarcely existed. But not for Claude. For Claude, everything existed. And, unlike the true Frenchman, he was a wanderer. His English, good before, was soon so fluent that he was entirely at home with it; and, discovering the British Museum, he spent long hours in its reading rooms. But the core of his experiences were the walks: the watching, the listening.

Slowly, remorselessly, the old pattern began to re-emerge. It began with Druard's resentment of Claude's long solitary walks, continued with petty arguments. Presently Claude had his first fight in a pub. Then a second. Worst of all, their work began going badly. It was Claude who led the way to Limehouse. . . .

And after that they were back where they had been. In the

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

Chinese quarter they found hashish and opium; in Soho itself they at last found absinthe; and soon they were living to themselves again in a hermetic world of daze and dream.

As before, Druard suffered the more acutely, both from the physical effects of their debauchery and from the pangs of remorse. Shortly before Christmas he had an attack of delirium tremens and for a few weeks thereafter was too sick and weak even to go out. One night Claude awakened to find him kneeling beside his bed with tears streaming down his cheeks. "Pray with me, boy," he murmured. "For the love of God, pray with me." A crucifix made its appearance; then a rosary; and when he was strong enough Druard tottered out to find a priest.

His maudlin tears and piety filled Claude with contempt. But he despised himself too—for his own cruelty and savagery. He tried to restrain himself from striking out, but he couldn't; Druard was a soft cloying clinging thing around his neck, an octopus strangling him, dragging him down, and he lashed and tore at him with blind instinct. Sometimes he would have the feeling of almost physical suffocation. He must have fresh air or die. And rushing from their rooms, he would again walk the streets: endlessly, tirelessly.

One night he dreamed wildly and horribly. He was walking, stumbling; down dim aisles with a monstrous weight on his shoulders; and the weight was enveloping, smothering him, clinging ever closer, ever tighter, and now it had a voice and the voice whispered, it kept whispering, "Boy—boy—dear boy—" He was carrying it on a pilgrimage, as an offering, a sacrifice, he was carrying it through the years, through the centuries, through the dim aisles of blue and green, the aisles of cathedrals, the aisles of forests; through the forests to the river, along the river to the wide banks, past the banks, past the white cities, past the dancing files, to the high place, to the Queen. The Queen was black against the jungle. She was shining. She waited, motionless, and he approached and stopped before her and knelt. He knelt, and from his shoulders, at last, he took his burden, he took his offering, his sacrifice, and laid

THE DAY ON FIRE

them before her—except that now there was again a change, and what he laid down was not there; only he was there. *He* was the offering, *he* the sacrifice. And he lay before the Queen, before the tall shining figure; and he waited, the figure waited, then the figure moved. It moved closer, it bent over him, it bent to accept him, consume him, and he cried out, but no sound came, he struggled, but without movement; and the figure was upon him; its legs, its breasts, its arms, its throat, its face and hair and eyes . . . and then only the eyes . . . it was not the body that was devouring him, but the eyes; the eyes above him, upon him, within him, the eyes watching, devouring, consuming, the eyes of omega—Ω—deep violet and gleaming. . . .

From then on they followed him everywhere. Through the streets, through their rooms. Through his sleeping, through his waking. Through the green halls, the blue smoke, the gray city.

The eyes followed him.

Druard followed him.

No matter at what hour he got up, or how quickly he left, Druard was after him. However far he walked, Druard was at his heels.

Then, one night, it was different. Claude stirred and rose, and Druard pleaded, but he broke away. Druard rose to follow, but he hit out. He hit with blind fury, and Druard fell to the floor. For a wild, terrible instant he stood above him. Now murder was in his heart and hands. He stood still. He swayed. Eyes watched him. They were not Druard's eyes, but the *other* eyes, and he swayed away from Druard, and to the door, and plunged downstairs into the street. He ran on and on through the streets, through the night. But still the eyes followed him; still Druard seemed to follow him; Druard was still there; the eyes were still there; they were still moving closer; they were huge, they were violet; they were deep violet caves, violet pits; and they were upon him, around him, he was within them, engulfed by them, spinning and falling. Far off, there was a terrible sound, at first faint and muffled, then louder and louder. It was the sound of his own screaming. . . .

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

There was a livid welt on Druard's cheekbone. His mouth worked. His eyes glittered. Behind him were the other eyes, watching. "I am going," Claude said. "The time has come; it has to be. I am going."

He was not screaming now. His voice was very quiet. It was Druard who was screaming: "No, no—you can't! You can't!"

Claude was packing his few belongings, and he followed him around. "You can't walk out on me like this. Throw me off. Abandon me. . . . No, no, no!"

Claude said nothing. He finished his packing and closed his small grip. Druard watched him, trembling, and suddenly his rage turned to tears. "Please, please," he begged. "Dear boy, don't do this to me. No—please no. I love you—need you—" He seized Claude's arm and clung to it. "Please, please—don't go. Don't go, don't leave me—"

Claude pulled away. With his grip he moved toward the door. "I have to," he said. He turned and looked at Druard, and then past him at the watching eyes. "It's the only hope. The only—way out."

"Way out? Way out from what? From me?" Druard's rage flooded back. "That's all it is, *hein*—that you want to get rid of me? You think you're the strong one, don't you? That I'm the one that needs you, but no, you don't need me. All right, go ahead. Go and see what happens—how you'll live—who'll support you. Without me you're nothing, you fool! Go, damn you, go and see! You won't eat—you won't live—you won't write. I can see it and I laugh at you. I spit at you. Claude Morel, the godalmighty poet, who will never again write a line—"

His voice screamed, quavered, broke. Claude opened the door. Druard watched.

"Goodbye," Claude said.

"You're still going?"

"Yes, I'm going."

"No, you're not," Druard said. His voice was different—quieter. His hand went to his pocket, and when he removed it

THE DAY ON FIRE

it held a revolver. "I bought this for myself," he said. "My own poor miserable self, too weak to live—"

There was a pause. The only sound was his breathing.

"But now," he said, "—but now—you strong one, you god-like one—"

Claude turned. The gun wavered; it shook wildly. But it fired. Claude felt the burn of pain in his leg—his knee. He felt the splintering of bone. He saw Druard spin above him as he buckled and fell. But what he was most conscious of was neither pain nor image, but sound—a single sound—a sound that now stayed with him, strong and strangely comforting, as the rest reeled away into darkness. It was the blast of the firing gun: hard, clear, and clean.

((4))

HE WAS in a white room, in a bed, and he was looking up from the bed through a veil of pain and fever. Beyond the veil, figures moved, voices spoke to him. "The patella has been badly splintered," said the man in white, in English. "We have done what we can; now time must do the rest." . . . "Turn over now," said the woman in white. "Open your mouth. Raise your arm. Go to sleep now. Wake up. Turn over."

Then there were many figures, many voices, clipped and cold, and the voices beat down upon him.

"You have lived with the accused for eighteen months?"

"Yes."

"In Paris and London?"

"Yes."

"In an unnatural relationship?"

He was silent.

"As homosexuals?"

He was still silent.

"Answer me."

He turned his head. "Yes," he murmured.

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

"You were habitual drunkards? You were users of narcotics?"

"Yes."

"And at the time of the attempted murder the accused was—"

He faced them again. "No—no," he said.

"He was not drunk? Not drugged? Then the assault was in cold blood? Premeditated?"

"No."

"What then? It's no use lying."

"I'm not lying."

"Tell us then. He was drunk, drugged, raving. He cursed you—raised his gun. Where did he aim the gun?"

"I—I don't know."

"Stop your lying. He was in the same room with you, ten feet from you, and you don't know if—"

"I don't remember."

"Ah, you don't remember. You too were drunk and drugged, is that it? You'd had a fight. You were both blind, raging. You wanted to murder each other."

"No. No."

"What then?"

The pain burned in his leg; the fever welled in his brain.

They left. They returned. They left again. There was only the pain and the fever and the bed and the white walls, and at intervals the nurses coming and going.

His only testimony was from the hospital ward. He wasn't taken to court, he didn't see Druard, and it was not until several days after the trial that he learned what had happened. Druard had at first been charged with attempted murder; then this had been changed to criminal assault, and, upon the jury's verdict of guilty, he had been sentenced to two years in prison. "This man is not a felon of the usual sort," the judge had said, "but in many ways men of his ilk, and of that of his depraved companion, are even more dangerous to society than the habitual criminal. For the protection of society, and as an example

THE DAY ON FIRE

to others who undermine it by corruption and vice, I therefore sentence him to the maximum penalty under the law."

So Druard had vanished: silent, invisible. And Claude lay in his bed. Because of infection and his miserable general condition, the bullet had not been removed from his knee until a week after the shooting, and even after its extraction the wound was slow in healing. Infection recurred; pain and fever recurred.

It was in a month less three days that he left the hospital. And he did not leave alone. A policeman met him at the entrance, took him to the railway station, rode with him to Dover, and put him on a Channel boat. The boat landed him in Calais. He had no bag, no possessions, and in his pocket three English pennies. So he began to walk. He walked eastward, limping. He walked all day, each day for a week, begging or filching enough food to sustain him, and at night he slept in barns, fields, or forests. Asleep, he dreamed of Druard. Awake, he thought of Druard. He thought of him in his cell in prison: his thin body stooped, his sunken eyes looking out from depths of gray stone. And as the eyes followed him he became aware of a sensation so strange to him that at first he did not know what it was. Later he did know: it was guilt. And guilt walked with him. Guilt rose and lay down with him. He walked on. The sun rose and set, the road rose and fell; it turned and twisted and forked and became another road and then another, and still he followed it, slowly, steadily, across the breadth of France.

Some days his leg seemed all right and he scarcely limped at all. On others it swelled and throbbed and his progress was no more than a hobble. Yet he walked on. He walked past the fields and the forests, and then the fields were gone, and there was only forest, and then beyond the forest a river, slow and yellow, and beside the river, a few miles later, a town; and he came to the town and entered it and walked through its streets and squares. Faces looked at him, but he didn't see them. He walked on until he came to the final street, and there he turned in and walked along it until he came to a door, and it was the

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

final door and he opened it. There were the shelves and counters as they had always been. There was a customer fingering a tray of shoelaces, and beyond him a tall black figure watching with sharp eyes to make sure he did not slip a pair into his pocket.

Claude waited until the eyes were raised to him. Then he said, "Hello, Mother."

(())

He was in bed again. In fever again. Walls revolved around him, but they were no longer white. A figure stood above him, but it was no longer white. It was black and tall.

He was too weak to go on. The doctor came. He tried to turn away, but was too weak, and the doctor examined him. Later his mother appeared with bottle and spoon.

He took the medicine and slept. Outside, at intervals, the church bells rang. It was light and then dark and then light again. His sister Yvette came in, looking much bigger than before, and said, "You will be all right, all right very soon, Claude dear. Today I lighted a candle for you after Mass."

He slept. He woke. He lay motionless, soaked in sweat, through the long midsummer days. The doctor came again and examined his knee and took pulse and temperature and prescribed more medicines. And he asked questions. It had been a burglar who shot him, Claude said: an armed burglar who had broken into his room in London and whom he had surprised at his thieving. "Ah, those English," muttered the doctor. "They are barbarians—worse than the Germans."

As a result of the long walk the knee had to heal all over again. His mother watched him—sharply, measuringly. But she spoke rarely, and then only about his health, his medicines, his food and sleep. During his long journey across France he had sometimes wondered if she would accept him at all; if she would take him back into the house from which he had fled so often and with such bitterness. But the acceptance had been without question; almost without comment. Not in ten life-

THE DAY ON FIRE

times could she have put it into words, but what she had said to him as clearly as in words was, "This is your home. You have gone away and come back, and two years have passed, and we are strangers. But I am still your mother. And this is still your home."

He, for his part, had told her little. She knew that he had been in Paris and London. He told her he had written much and earned his living at odd jobs. He told her about the armed burglar and the few other lies that seemed necessary.

(())

Slowly Claude grew stronger. He was still thin, but no longer skeletal, and as his hair grew and normal color returned to his cheeks his head ceased to resemble a skull. Toward the end of August he began going out for short walks.

His mother left him alone now, and there was no need to block the door. He sat at the table with pencil and paper before him.

The horror was gone, but so were the dreams. The pit had closed, but so had the windows. The only window was the one beside him. It looked out on a yard, a privy, a fence, a plane tree, dust.

He looked away. The windows had never opened outward. They had opened inward. On himself. That was all he had ever written: himself. . . . But in the past he had at least known what that self was: the seer, the thief of fire, the I-who-is-another. And now there were none of these. No vision, no fire, no *other*. There was himself, and what was that?

What had happened to him? What was left of him?

Perhaps by writing he could find out.

(())

He had his paper. He had his pencil. . . . *Was it from you, Mother*, he wrote, *that these came to me? With your bitter milk? . . . Then, thank you, Mother. And damn you, Mother . . . Was it your pride, transmitted to me, become my pride,*

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

that turned me against you; that made your white my black, your true my false, your good my evil? His mother was a Catholic, fearing God and hell. Had he therefore become a pagan because God and hell have no power over pagans? His mother lived her life by the judgments of society. Had he therefore become a savage because society had no power over savages?

. . . Partly, perhaps. But not wholly . . . There had been more to his life than defiance; more than revolt. In the beginning, at least, it had possessed a great affirmation. He had broken all barriers. He had been all things that the world forbade him to be: mountebank, beggar, artist, scoundrel—priest. Yes, priest. Priest of the word, the image, the vision, the revelation. Of the night and the sunburst, of the storm and the rainbow.

He wrote: *I dreamed crusades, unrecorded voyages of discovery, republics without a history, religious wars hushed up, revolutions of customs, the displacements of races and continents: I believed in sorcery of every sort. . . . I invented the colors of vowels: A black, E white, I red, O blue, U green. I regulated the form and movement of every consonant, and with instinctive rhythms I prided myself on inventing a poetic language accessible some day to all the senses. . . . I was a master of phantasmagoria. I fixed frenzies in their flight. I wrote silences. I wrote the night. I wrote the Apocalypse.*

Oh yes, he had had pride. He had had genius, and the pride of genius. Consciously and deliberately he had followed his course, followed his star; he had become a man beyond men, a voyager beyond the walls of the mortal prison.

He wrote: *My justification was my poetry. "I am a poet," I said. "That is the root of the tree, the foundation of the building, the heart of it all: that I am a poet." But soon—how soon! —I discovered that there is no place for a poet in the modern world. So I created my own world. I created it out of strength and pride, out of genius and vision, out of dream and desire, and as I fashioned it I looked upon it and I saw that it was good.*

But it was not good.

THE DAY ON FIRE

For the world that he had thought to make was not a world. It was a refuge, a cocoon, a cave, and in that cave he had walked through darkness: a somnambulist. *I called my poems Illuminations. I should have called them Hallucinations. For that is what they were: the distillations of a false alchemy, of pride and blindness, leading me on toward a pit of darkness. The windows of the soul are still closed. The Tree of Good and Evil still stands. In my frenzy of living and of creation I achieved no mystical union with God—but only chaos. It was a debacle. It has left me bankrupt. I seized beauty, I seized truth, I seized freedom; and my hands are empty. . . . Howling underneath the leaves, the wolf spits out the lovely plumes of his feast of fowls. And like him I am consumed.*

He had tried to heighten, to intensify, his life to the ultimate pitch, to embrace all experience, to transcend his individuality and become the I-who-is-another. But all he had accomplished was to lose the I-who-was-himself. Like Faust, he had sold himself to the devil—to the Demon of the Absolute. And the Demon had claimed its own. He was not a man, but what was left of a man: the death's head of his own alchemy, the ash and dross that was left when the flame went out.

I shall climb from the pit, but I shall climb alone. I shall go on alone. I have been in hell, but now my Season in Hell is over. And I shall be free to possess truth in one soul and one body.

Dreams, he wrote. *Dreams have been the enemy. They have crowded round too thick.*

And—I have done all I could. I can do no more.

He could write nothing more. Without the frenzy of living, the frenzy of creation, he was no longer a madman. But he was also no longer a poet. If the madness was gone, so too was the foundation, the root, the heart of his being.

What was left was . . . fragments.

He had returned to his beginnings—to Cambon—but in Cambon he would forever be an alien. What then? He had re-

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

entered the world of men. He must walk among men. But could he? Could he himself be a man, or was he maimed and ravaged beyond repair—a thing of shreds and fragments, like the dreams that had been his life? Had he reached final disintegration and dissolution, or was there something, somewhere in the world, that could restore him, make him whole? . . . Faust, in the end, had been saved. Could *he* be? . . . Where could he turn? To what? Or to whom?

It was early fall when he said to his mother, "I am going away again. I am going on a pilgrimage."

"A pilgrimage?" She looked at him blankly.

"Not to Jerusalem, Mother," he said "on another pilgrimage and this one may take longer."

Words and dreams. Dreams and words. He had been damned by them. He had been in hell.

"I am not a prisoner of reason," he had said in his pride. But he had been a prisoner of unreason, and now reason must be born again. He arose in the night. He went to his table and he needed no lamp, for the window was bright with the light of the moon. Taking a pencil and paper, he wrote, and what he wrote was a prayer: . . . *The world is good. I shall bless life. I shall love my brothers. These are not childish promises; nor the hope of escaping old age and death. God is my strength; yes, I praise God. And let my soul, oh God, redeem its promise, in spite of the night alone and the day on fire.*

Much would be lost. Much would be left behind in hell. But still he would rise out of hell. . . . *God of Judgments: I repent my sins, but not my dreams. I have been damned by the rainbow, but still I shall follow the rainbow—beyond the seas, beyond the deserts, beyond encompassing night. In the night always—always—my eyes will awake to the silver star, and I will walk in the night, I will walk with the Magi, toward the morning, toward the rainbow, toward the Christmas on earth that is to come.*

The night had paled. Morning came. But not Christmas morning. The room was cold and gray. And outside it was gray

THE DAY ON FIRE

too. The light did not illumine. It hid more than it revealed. It hid the moon, the stars, the gleam of night, the shining firmament.

. . . As he must now hide his own, he thought; his own inner firmament of word and image, dream and vision. . . . Close the soul away. Clothe it. Cover its nakedness. No more vision, no more dream. Faust is dead; and Apollo; and Lucifer. There is a yard and the privy, the house and the street; the courtroom, the factory chimney, the cash drawer. One must live in the world that is.

PART TWO

The Dispossessed

((5))

TO THE NORTH was desert, to the south the sea. Between them, black and bare, stood the walls of a long-dead volcano, and around the volcano—on its slopes, in its crater—was the city of Aden.

Aden was British: the Empire's fortress and coaling station on the route from Suez to India. And since the opening of the Canal, eleven years before, it had grown from torpid village to small metropolis. Few of its sweltering thousands, though, were Englishmen. Most were Arabs, from the surrounding areas of Yemen, Muscat, and Oman. There were many Indians, too—for Aden was administratively part of India—and many Somalis, from the nearby African coasts. There were Greeks, Syrians, Armenians, Jews. And, in lesser numbers, and with better status, there were Western Europeans of assorted nationalities and occupations. Merchants and traders, clerks and officials. Germans and Swedes, Italians and Frenchmen.

Among the French were Monsieur Paul Colbert, Consul of the Republic, and Monsieur Emil Gorbeau, proprietor of the import-export firm of Gorbeau and Company (Aden), Limited. Both had been long in Aden. They were close friends and on an ovenlike afternoon in 1880 the two sat in the consul's office over cooling drinks.

"*Eh bien,*" said Colbert, "we are used to the British, with their conniving and grabbing. First here, with Aden itself. Then all up and down the Red Sea, all over Africa. . . . But the Italians: *nom de Dieu!* Who are the Italians to get into such things?"

"I could have told you—"

THE DAY ON FIRE

"Of course you could have told me. I could have told you. I did tell them—the Quai d'Orsay—over and over. The Italians have their eye on Abyssinia. Even the Quai d'Orsay knows it—now; and they're all in an uproar. And they expect me to stop it. Me, mind you. They expect me to outwit the British Empire, to throw the Italians out, to make France supreme on the Red Sea. And what do they give me? Five thousand francs a month. Out of that I am supposed to live, run this office, pay a staff, entertain. I am even supposed to handle repatriations; to pay the way back to Marseilles for every no-good drunken tramp of a Frenchman that jumps ship or gets stranded here. It's murderous, I tell you. And on top of that I'm supposed to wage a private war against Italy."

The consul eyed his drink glumly. Then a sudden thought raised his head. "By the way," he said, "I hear you lost one of your clerks last week. You need a replacement, don't you? This isn't a drunk, the one I'm thinking of. He's—well, he's different."

"Different, how?"

"For one thing, I'm sure he's not a drunkard. I can tell by his eyes. They're queer eyes—very queer—but not a drunkard's. He has no money, no clothes, nothing. Yet, as I say, he's different. There's something about him. . . . Anyhow, I think you could use him; at least as a stopgap."

"And, quite incidentally of course, get him off your hands," Gorbeau smiled. "All right," he said, "send him around to see me."

(())

The eyes were open now, looking up at the sky. And it was full of stars. He knew the names of the stars now, for early in his journey he had bought a chart of the heavens to help him find his way in the trackless nights. The star he had followed south was Fomalhaut. It was in the constellation of Pisces, and its magnitude was 1.3.

Almost every night he looked up at the stars, for almost

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

every night he slept outdoors. On much of his journey it had been of necessity. Now it was from choice. He had been given a small room with a cot in the rear of the Gorbeau warehouse, but beyond the room was an open storage yard and soon he had moved his cot out into it. Under the stars, he slept. And when he awoke he often, at first, did not know where he was, for he had slept outdoors in so many places.

Now he woke and he was still in Aden.

Why? Because of the consul, for one thing, because of Gorbeau. They were why he was *still* there. But why had he come there in the first place?

Why? . . . No matter why. His season on Earth continued; he was here; that was enough. He was out of the deep caves, in the world of men, beneath the sky and stars. . . . *From the same desert, in the same night, always my eyes awake to the silver star. Always . . .* And through the desert, through the night, the Three Magi moved on in their own journey, toward their own star.

(())

Gorbeau and Company was a going and growing enterprise. Little merchandise was either bought or sold in Aden itself. But Aden was the trading post and transshipment point—the heart and center of the enterprise. The office on Queen's Way was jammed with ledgers, invoices, waybills, documents; the adjoining warehouse and wharf with the wares and staples of three continents.

Gorbeau habitually employed a staff of three Europeans—a chief clerk, a warehouse superintendent, and a general assistant. Claude became the assistant. In the office was another Frenchman, Marcel Rappe, and in the warehouse was an Irishman named Neil Fitzsimmons.

Rappe was small, bald and ageless. He talked little. He worked prodigiously. Order and neatness were his passions and what had brought him to this far and frowzy outpost was a mystery.

THE DAY ON FIRE

What had brought Fitzsimmons was, on the other hand, obvious. It was that old bringer and dispatcher, Adventure. A tall, red-haired, ramshackle man of perhaps thirty, he was as talkative as Rappe was taciturn, and Claude had been with him no more than a few hours before he knew that he had (1) run away from his County Sligo home at fourteen, (2) worked on ships and at odd jobs in many parts of the world, (3) come to Aden because it was the jumping-off place for Africa.

Claude's work was where he was needed, and he was needed more in the warehouse (—or godown, as he learned to call it, for in Aden everyone used the East Indian name). And this he preferred, though the labor was harder, for here was the very taste and smell and essence of the bloodstream of world trade.

He worked in the godown. He worked on the wharf. The raw produce for Europe was loaded onto lighters that were then moved out to the freighters at anchor; the wares for Africa into native dhows that pulled alongside. To the nearest shores of the Somalis was only some hundred and thirty miles, and the dhows often made it in a day and a night. Then a few days later they would reappear, their pots and pans and cottons replaced by hides and coffee and shells and gum. There would be an unloading—a reloading. Endlessly.

Dear Mother, he wrote: As you have perhaps gathered, I will probably again be away for some while. This time, however, I am not wandering. I have employment with a commercial firm. I am therefore enclosing herewith one hundred (100) francs, representing about one half of my savings to date. Since my personal needs are few, I hope to be able to continue to do this in the future.

(())

Aden burned. Aden fried. For perhaps two months, at mid-winter, the temperature dropped a few degrees and wisps of breeze drifted up from the Indian Ocean. Then the wisps faded

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

and died. The oven rekindled. Along the stagnant sea front the sheds and godowns lay flat and crushed in the sun, and above them the great lava crags gleamed with black incandescence. Over all curved the parched sky, clamped to earth and sea like a lid of brass.

Early in July, Gorbeau called Claude into his private office. Though he had of course been there often before, it had been only for brief visits, to receive instructions or answer a question; but this time Gorbeau offered him a chair and a cigar.

"You have been here now about a year," he said. "And how does it go with you?"

"All right."

"You are satisfied? You are happy?"

"Happiness, monsieur, is a—"

"In your work, I mean. Do you think we have treated you fairly? No complaints about salary?"

"No."

"By now you must have saved a fair amount. I notice you live very simply."

"My wants are simple."

"And so you send money home."

"Yes."

"To Cambon, I assume. You have a family there?"

"I have a mother."

"And—a young lady, perhaps?"

"No, no young lady."

Gorbeau puffed on his cigar. Through the smoke he studied Claude with his small shrewd eyes. "I have been thinking of your work for the firm," he said. "I of course know that Monsieur Rappe has spoken to you about coming into the office, that he has suggested it several times and each time you refused."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because it is not my sort of work."

"What is your sort of work, may I ask?"

Claude hesitated. "What I am—"

THE DAY ON FIRE

"What you are doing? Sorting coffee beans? Moving crates? . . . Monsieur Rappe, as you know, does not agree with you. Nor, may I add, I. As you are aware, our business, on the whole, has been good. Whatever one may think of Aden as a place to live, it's the center of a whole new developing trade area. It has grown enormously. We have grown with it. And I intend to grow further.

"To be specific. . . . Roughly half our trade is with Africa, both in imports and exports. The gross figures last year were highly satisfactory, but the net was not. As you know, we do our African buying and selling at Zeila, on the Somali coast. Hamid Nomoury is in charge there, and he is a good man—for an Arab. But the setup is wrong. Zeila itself buys little and supplies none of our merchandise; almost everything goes in or comes out by caravan. We must establish our own African enterprise. It cannot all be done at once, of course, but a start can be made. Have you heard of the city of Harar?" he asked.

"In Abyssinia."

"Yes, in Abyssinia. More or less, at least. It's on the edge of the highlands where Abyssinia begins; but not part of its kingdoms. Harar has been Moslem for centuries. Until about seven years ago it was ruled by native Arab emirs and shut tight as Mecca. But then the Egyptians moved in. The British were behind it, of course—they always are—but they've been so busy planting flags along the coast they haven't had time to move in after them. So there it is—Harar—wide open at last, with no one in it; not a single trading firm. The one who gets there first is going to control the trade of half of north-east Africa."

Gorbeau puffed at his cigar. He looked at Claude. "Well, what do you think of it?" he asked. "I don't mean the general plan; that's my concern. I mean for yourself. I have been thinking about this carefully and I feel you are the man for the job. You came to me out of a jail, and from God knows where before that. But you're still the best man I've been able to find in Aden. You're self-reliant. You're steady. Wherever

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

you got it, you have an education; you know languages. That is of extreme importance in this assignment—to know languages. Arabic, to begin with. And the ability to pick up dialects as you go along."

"What would be expected of me—besides talking?"

"I would want you to leave for Zeila as soon as possible. With you you would take a full cargo of trade goods and at Zeila transfer them to a caravan. Our *own* caravan: that is of the essence. Nomoury will help you organize it. Then you will go up to Harar. Arriving there, you will sell our trade goods; you will buy raw produce; you will confer with local merchants and officials, open a trading post, and continue buying and selling. We will send up further goods by our own caravans, and you will continue to send down African produce."

"And for how long would this be?"

"For yourself, I would say about a year. My hope, of course, is that this will become a permanent part of the business, but once the trade is established there should be no need for you to stay there. If you are thinking of money," he said, "I believe you will find me reasonable. For a start, I am prepared to pay you half again your present salary, plus a two per cent commission on profits. Then we will see how things develop. The life may be hard, of course; sometimes even dangerous. I think it only fair to point that out. But you strike me as a man who doesn't care greatly about such things. . . . Anyhow—" Gorbeau pushed back his chair. "—there's my offer. As I say, I want to put the plan into effect at once. Think it over and give me your answer tomorrow."

Claude rose and shook his head. "No. No, monsieur," he said. "There is no need to wait until tomorrow."

(())

On the last night in Aden Claude lay out on his cot in the yard. He watched the stars. He watched bright Fomalhaut. "So you are still following it," he mused. "You are going to Africa."

THE DAY ON FIRE

In the morning, for perhaps the hundredth time, he supervised the loading of a dhow. But this time, when it was done, he did not climb back onto the wharf. He merely turned and looked up, and there was Gorbeau, and Gorbeau leaned down and shook hands.

"So good luck, *mon vieux*," he said. "We'll expect word from Zeila within a week, and from Harar as soon as you can manage."

Claude nodded. Gorbeau straightened and waved. The Arab captain shouted, ropes thudded on the deck, and the great green lateen sail creaked slowly up the mast. The dhow edged out into the crowded harbor. The helmsman chanted. The captain dozed. Claude watched the shore. And slowly, very slowly, it slipped past; it receded. The harbor mouth drew nearer: on one side a jetty, on the other a long sandspit, each with a lighthouse. They were close to the lighthouses, abreast of them, beyond them—and at that instant everything changed. The water was now no longer tan but blue. The limp sail stirred and bellied. The teakwood timbers creaked. "*Ayeee, ayaaa—*" came the cry of the helmsman, louder and shriller. And they moved out from the prison of Aden into the sweep of the sea.

For a while they followed the coast westward. Here they were on the great traffic lane leading from Aden to the Red Sea and Suez, and ships steamed past in stately procession. Then in the late afternoon, they veered south; the ships vanished, the coast vanished.

To the north now, toward sunset, was the strait of Bab el Mandeb, and here the wind shifted and struck them broadside, and the dhow rolled in the troughs of the sea. From below, presently, came a rattling and thumping, as the cargo shifted, and for an hour Claude worked in the hold with the Arab crew. When he came back on deck it was night. The crew made a charcoal fire in the iron stove amidships and cooked the evening meal of rice and goatmeat. Sparks from the fire blew out over the black water, under the stars.

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

Then there were only the stars. The fire was out. The crew slept, sprawled or huddled about the deck, except for a helmsman at the wheel. Watching, Claude saw the mast sway in long arcs against the stars. He had seen it before: on other boats, under other skies. From the deck of the boats in which, over the years, he had crossed the Mediterranean, the Adriatic, the Red Sea, the North Sea, the Baltic. And before that he had seen it too: not from a ship at all, but from a cot, a cot covered with canvas, the cot in the room of his boyhood, the room that was prison, the room of dreams. Oh yes, he had seen them, always seen them. The mast . . . the night . . .

*the star-archipelagoes and islands
in skies that call the wanderer, fierce, forlorn . . .*

He had seen them, known them, followed them, searching, asking. Asking:

*is it within these depthless nights you sleep in exile,
O hosts of golden birds, O day as yet unborn?*

As still he searched, still traveled, still moved on into horizons. Except that now it was in no Drunken Boat, no boat of dream or words. . . . *No, no more words.* . . . This was a boat of teak, of iron, of pitch, of rope, of canvas. It was bound from the port of Aden to the port of Zeila. It was owned by Monsieur Emil Gorbeau, merchant, trader, and commission agent. It carried a cargo of cotton, calico, pots, pans, knives, pins, beads, glassware.

The stars wheeled. The boat moved on. He slept. And in the morning, when he woke, the sun was shining on the coast of Africa.

(())

Dear Mother, he wrote: *You will be pleased to know that I am advancing in the world. I am no longer a warehouse employee but a traveling representative of my company—un vrai homme d'affaires; and no longer in Aden but in the town of*

THE DAY ON FIRE

Zeila on the Somali coast. I shall not be here long, however, for in a day or two I leave for the interior. My destination is a city called Harar, near the border of Abyssinia, where I am to open an office and trading post for our firm. A few days in Zeila will be more than enough. It is a dismal place: flat, baked by the sun, full of sand and dust and flies and dung.

My salary, as you know, has again been increased, and I have instructed the Aden office to send you, each month, one half of my pay. I also, of course, hope to make considerably more from my percentage of profits, but that is a matter for the future. I am glad to see from your recent letters that you no longer question my motives for being in this part of the world, or feel that I am wasting my time. . . . No, the time-wasting is in the past, I reassure you. I am now your own true son: working hard, making my way in the world.

((6))

"AYEEE, AYAAA—" There was again the sky. Again the sea. But the sky no longer dipped and wheeled above it, for the sea was a sea of land.

"Ayeee, ayaaa—" No helmsman here. It was a camel driver, prodding a rump with a long stick. There were five of them, and twenty camels, and one mule, and Claude, and they were all that lived or moved in the vast waste of space and stillness.

Claude rode on the mule. He had not wanted it, but Hamid Nomoury had insisted, claiming that a caravan leader must be mounted—if not for comfort, then at least for prestige—and a mule was easier for a European than a camel. Slung on his back was a gun, the best that Gorbeau had been able to find in Aden. And he had not wanted this either; he had wanted to leave it in Zeila. But here Nomoury had been even more insistent, saying, "It is impossible—I will not hear of it—that you go into such country without arms."

"I thought it was the northeast route that was dangerous,"



JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

Claude had said. "Through the Danakil country. Several caravans have come in while I've been in Zeila. None have had any trouble."

"Yes, that is true," Nomoury conceded. "But let me point out, monsieur, that these caravans are all Arab. They belong to Abou Dakir. His caravans are safe. But a stranger's, a competitor's—" Nomoury shrugged. "No, if we are transporting our own goods we must be prepared to protect them."

From his mule, at the end of the procession, he surveyed his troops, his army of five, spaced out among the camels ahead. One was an Arab, the others Somalis. All were ragged and barefoot. The four Somalis were tall, gaunt, angular, almost skeletal. The Arab, on the other hand, was short, almost dwarfish. His name was Egal, and he ranked as head driver, for he had made the trip to Harar many times. The Somalis took his orders without argument, and he in turn took Claude's. He knew the way. He knew camels. They moved on without trouble or incident.

The sun flamed. The dust hung in the air. From his stores Claude took a length of cotton cloth and, with Egal's help, made it into a Kaffiyah, the Arab headdress. Unaccustomed to riding, he developed sores and for the first time in years felt a stiffness in his right knee. So presently he turned the mule into an auxilliary pack animal and went afoot, as did the others, beside the camels. Immediately he felt better, more natural, more himself.

He walked. Through the dust. Through the miles. The only men they saw were those of other caravans, in the blaze of daylight, moving past them from the interior toward the sea. In the first week there were only two of these; both small, like their own. But on the eighth or ninth day, in the late afternoon, a third appeared, approaching slowly over the wastes ahead, and this was a procession of a different sort. It was far longer than the others, but its length did not consist of loaded camels. The only camels were spaced at intervals, with armed Arabs atop their humps, and between them was a

THE DAY ON FIRE

long dark straggling chain of men afoot. . . . Or at least they seemed men until they came closer. And then they became women and children. Perhaps two hundred of them . . . black: night-black and naked in the desert dust. They carried loads. Their backs were bent. They moved in utter silence, their eyes fixed on the earth.

There were no slaves in Aden; the British had wiped the trade out. But Claude had seen them in Zeila, herded in pens near the market place. Once, seeing them, he would have felt outrage and anger. But here he had turned away, feeling nothing. And he turned away now. Once the world had been his—or so he thought: to shape, to change, to bend to his will. . . . But no longer. . . . *Priests, professors, masters, generals, emperors: you have won. The world is yours. Yours to rule. Yours to change. Not mine.*

"By Allah, that's a good lot," said Egal, watching the procession. "Another ton of piasters for old Abou Dakir."

(())

The miles unrolled. The waste spread parched and scabrous, gleaming in sulphurous light. Each day, often for hours on end, mirages lay before them: vast sky-blue lakes and seas that receded remorselessly. They moved on. And across the flatland, there arose what seemed to be still another mirage; but Egal pointed and said "Biyo Kaboba," and in the evening they came to the one oasis between Zeila and Harar. No other caravan was there. They had the haven to themselves—the trees, the shade, the soft earth, the water.

Then the oasis was behind them. There was only the waste again: waste of earth, waste of sky. They moved under the sky, through the stillness, through a cauldron of silence. Once or twice a day—no more now—there rose the thin cry, "Ayeee, ayaaa—" And five times each day the drivers spread small faded rugs and knelt and murmured prayers toward Mecca. Mecca was to the northeast, behind them. They turned to pray, and then turned again and moved on. Only Claude did not

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

turn. He did not look back at all, but only ahead, to the west and south, to the empty land, the empty sky; and the land remained empty—barren, still—but into the sky, each afternoon, there came the sun, moving up from behind and passing them, moving down ahead to the horizon, and at the end of day the sun streamed red and huge into his squinting eyes. He watched it set. He watched the dusk, the night, the stars. Lying out beside his tent, he watched Fomalhaut burning in the sky; and as the night passed it grew brighter, with his eyes closed it was still there, bright, burning, and in the morning still there, brightest of all—only now no longer the star but again the sun. In the rising sun the drivers knelt and prayed and he stood and was silent. Then they loaded the camels and moved on. . . .

forward.

*The march, the burden and the desert;
from the night alone,
through the day on fire.*

They moved on. Through the waste. The sun flamed. The earth shimmered. Mirages rose and gleamed and dissolved, and they plodded on through the horizons, as it seemed now to Claude they would plod forever. . . . But it was not forever. On the morning of the third day he became aware of a slow change. . . . The earth had been flat. Or it had risen and fallen in waves. But now it was different—rising but not falling, rising gradually, steadily through the miles—as they moved up a great tilt of the land. The earth's color and texture changed too. It was darker, heavier.

All that day, the slope continued—steepened. Far ahead, it surged up into what was not a mirage but a range of hills, and the hills were not tan but purple, and through the purple ran streaks of green. Then for the first time there was green around them—a pale and withered green, to be sure, but still green, not tan, the green of life—among the thornbushes the green of leaves and stalks and strips of grass. A miracle rose up: a tree. Beyond it more trees.

THE DAY ON FIRE

The waste was wholly gone now: a vast gleaming plain spread below and behind them. Ahead, the hills were closer, higher, greener; trees and plants were greener; sycamore, locust, begonia, euphorbia. With every step they were higher. With every foot gained the earth burgeoned more brightly.

Then the last day . . . and still they climbed toward the sky, up the valley, up the ridges, and on the crest of a ridge Egal pointed and said, "Kondudo," and there ahead, to the south and west, above the hills, was the squat flat-topped mountain that was the watchtower of Harar. They moved on toward it, past it, still ascending, and now at last they were in country not only of greenness, of life, but of human life, passing herds-men and huts and then villages of huts, huddled, spike-topped, made of mud and thatch, from which dark faces watched them silently as they went by.

"I am the first European they have ever seen," Claude thought. "The first white man in their country. But they do not know it." They could not know it. For there was no whiteness in his face. He wore the Kaffiyah and burnous of the desert.

They moved on. Up another valley; past a wooded slope; to another ridge. They topped the ridge, and there it was. . . . *Harar*. . . . A huge sprawl of city slanting up to the evening sky. A thick dark wall surrounded it, fronting the slope before them. Beyond it were more walls, walls of houses, tiering upward; above them terraces, rooftops, minarets, domes; between them streets, squares, alleys, steep stairways; a honeycomb of city, of mud and thatch and stone and breathing life, crouched on its hillside beneath the setting sun.

For it was evening now. The sun sank. By the time they reached them the gates had swung shut, and, with other late-comers, they had to camp for the night on the slope outside. Here there was wood for a fire, and they built one and sat around it in the darkness. Through the slits in the walls they could see other fires and flickering lamps and hear voices, as Harar stirred in the night. Then the sounds faded. The lamps

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

dimmed. Their fire dimmed. There was only the night and the stars.

Lying beneath them, Claude waited for sleep. For the morning.

In the morning we shall enter fabulous cities. . . .

And he would be the first. The first to see, to know, to tread those ancient stones of Africa. The first Barbarian of the North.

Then the morning came. The gates opened. They moved in. There were soldiers, officials, noise, questions, confusion. There was a crowd around them, pressing close, staring, talking; brown faces, and black faces . . . and then another face, a different face . . . a figure coming toward them across the square; a large figure, tall, broad, in a brown robe, with a brown beard; and he came quickly and greeted them and said, "Salaam. Marhaba, Salaam aleikum." . . . Then he stopped. He looked at Claude. At his face, his eyes. Now his own eyes were staring. And he said, "Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu—un européen!"

A big hand enveloped Claude's. "You speak French, perhaps? . . . Yes? . . . Ah—good. Excellent!" The face beamed. The voice boomed. "I am Father Hippolyte Lutz of the Capuchin Order. Welcome, my son."

(())

Dear Mother, he wrote: A caravan for the coast leaves tomorrow, so I hasten to write you. Our business continues to develop, and now I am a real storekeeper: my mother's son. But there are many problems, many obstacles. First and worst, there are exorbitant duties leveled on all that enters or leaves the town. Bribes are not only expected but demanded. To ask for credit is hopeless, and to give it is to cut one's throat. Also the exchange situation is most complicated. The official currency is the Egyptian piaster, but the Maria Theresa thaler is the most commonly used, and there are also francs, pounds sterling, Turkish piasters, Greek drachmas, and Indian rupees—plus much straight barter.

THE DAY ON FIRE

I am glad the remittances have been reaching you from the Aden office. There is a Monsieur Rappe there who is most reliable and whom you would greatly admire. In a letter accompanying this one I am asking him to send you an additional one thousand (1000) francs, representing a share of my percentage profits to date.

The caravans came and went. The market hummed. From the market great crowds spilled over into Maison Gorbeau—merchants, traders, agents, shopkeepers—and he spent the hours buying and selling. Egal, aging and weary of caravans, had asked to stay on with him and served as foreman and general assistant; a Samoli called Ahmed handled the moving of merchandise; and upstairs there was an ancient Harari, Mohammed, who cooked and cleaned.

"On the whole it goes well," he wrote to Aden. And it was so. In the beginning, to be sure, there had been difficulties, for as a white man, however unwhite, he was automatically suspect, and the Egyptians, though theoretically avid for foreign trade, had greeted him with upturned palms that were not strictly symbols of welcome. A 100 per cent tax had been levied on his imports. The rental for the store was set fantastically high. But he was patient, he persevered; and things improved. A few well-placed bribes reduced tax and rental, and soon the simple equation of supply and demand was taking care of the rest. Up from the coast came the pots, pans, pins, knives, and yard goods. Down went the coffee, hides, fruits, gums, and grains. As the traffic grew, the store grew, and in six months it was established, accepted, as the principal trading post in the city.

There were other factors, too, in its success. For one thing, the company took no part in the slave trade, and thus did not compete with the Arab entrepreneurs in the most lucrative of their activities. And for another, Claude had decided to use the established caravans of Abou Dakir rather than organizing his own. "Our own will come in time," he wrote to Gorbeau. "But for the moment, I think it wiser not to push too hard."

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

And Gorbeau wrote back commending his caution and diplomacy.

Most important of all, perhaps, in the company's development was, as his employer had foreseen, Claude's gift of tongues. Arabic, to be sure, he had already known, and this was the principal language of commerce and politics; but to it he had soon added fluent Somali and enough Amharic, Galla, and Issa so that he could talk, in his own speech, to everyone with whom he dealt. And for this he was soon famous in the city: the *ferangi* who was not a *ferangi*; the outsider who, alone among its inhabitants, could speak in all the languages of many-tongued Harar.

There were two other *ferangi* merchants in the city: Spiranthos, a Greek, and Mardik, a Syrian. Both had been there for many years, ran small shops off the market square, and at first strongly resented Claude's coming. But with them, too, he had been patient and forbearing. He had called on them. He had pointed out that his business was primarily import and export, whereas theirs was retail local trade.

Abou Dakir, surrounded by his retinue, always called at the Maison Gorbeau on his trips to Harar. Another visitor to the store and a frequent one, was Father Hippolyte Lutz.

"You are a Catholic, my son?" the priest had asked Claude early on.

"No," he had said.

"A Protestant?"

"No."

"What then, might I ask?"

"A Zoroastrian."

Father Lutz had not pursued the point, but neither had he taken offense, as Claude had hoped, and stayed away. On the contrary, he had returned the next day, as friendly as before, and continued to come through the weeks and the months.

After his rebuffed attempt he did not, for some time, speak again of religion. He spoke of Harar, its people, its sights and sounds, its smells, and offered to show Claude such parts of

THE DAY ON FIRE

the city as he did not yet know. He spoke of Abou Dakir and the slave trade—sadly; and of the African land and its people—fervently.

He had, it developed, come to Harar some six months before Claude. And it had been by way of neither Aden nor Zeila, but across the breadth of Abyssinia from the Nile and Khartoum. Indeed, his original assignment had been to the Abyssinian kingdom of Shoa. "But they are mostly Christians there," he said. "Coptic Christians. And my welcome was less than cordial. The Moslems, to be sure, love me no more than the Copts. But they are not fanatic here; they let me stay."

He had only the smallest of churches: a mere cross-topped hut of mud and wattle that he had built with his own hands. His converts had been few—and these wholly from among the lowest, the poorest, the pagan fringe of the Moslem city. "But I am patient," he said. "I doubt if I am a wise man, but I am a patient one, and I know that the human soul cannot be driven, even to Christ."

The rains fell. There were mud and mosquitoes.

The rains stopped. There were dust and flies. The seasons passed. The earth turned. In her letters, occasionally, his mother wrote of events in Cambon, France, Paris, the world. But they had no meaning for him. "All such things are now incomprehensible to me," he wrote back. "Like the Moslems, I know that what is, is—what happens, happens—and that is all."

What happened, happened. One day the old cook, Mohammed, died. The next week Claude discovered an error in his accounts that took him four days to rectify.

Sometimes he left the courtyard and the store. He walked through the town. He walked beyond it into the countryside. With Egal and a train of donkeys he visited the villages in the hills, taking with him merchandise he had received from Aden and bringing back such local produce as was available. The earth was red and rich and living. High on the hillsides stood the sycamores and locust trees, the acacia, mimosa, and

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

flowering begonia, the green-spiked euphorbia rising like candleabra against the sky. There were fields of green khat, of yellow durra, and long slanting meadows filled with zebu cattle. In the valleys were lakes: not mirages, not dried beds of salt and soda, but blue-green lakes of gleaming water, as fresh and living as the earth. The land shone. The land burgeoned under the sun. Only the villages were poor—and the people. But they did not know it. They were ignorant, benighted, dirty, diseased; but they did not know it. They sat in the mud in front of their huts, pushed their single-stick plows through the red earth, ate and slept and copulated and said their prayers to Allah, as well. What was, was. What happened, happened.

So he moved among them: the *ferangi* who was not a *ferangi*. Fomalhaut blazed in the southern sky, over the Ogaden. But he no longer watched it. Each night was the same as the last, each day as the last; and they would be the same forever. . . .

Until one night, suddenly, not the same; for he had awakened, and there was a sound—from the store downstairs. He got his gun from the cupboard, loaded it, went down the steps. Opening a door, he entered the store and stopped. A shadow moved, slowly, warily; then as Claude called "Stop!" a figure darted with sudden swiftness across the room toward the warehouse door. Claude raised his gun, but did not fire. Something about the figure—its size or movement—stopped him and, instead, he dropped the gun and ran in pursuit. The figure entered the warehouse, vanished briefly, reappeared at a far door and struggled to open it. And there Claude caught it. The figure became flesh, the shadow a body, and he seized it and jerked backward and the body fell; and then Egal appeared with a lantern, and he and Claude looked down into the face of a boy.

The boy was brown, thin, almost naked. In the light of the lantern his face seemed all bone and eyes—the face, simultaneously, of a child and an old man—and the eyes were wide and wild, filled half with defiance, half with fear.

THE DAY ON FIRE

Egal snatched at his hand and pulled something away. It was a half-eaten plum. He searched his rags and found another plum, a few dates, a strip of dried meat.

(())

Once fear and hunger were gone, the boy, Vayu, was polite, soft-spoken, gentle. He did instantly what he was told to do, and when not told, found ways on his own to make himself useful. Soon he had taken old Mohammed's place and was an integral part of the ménage. Egal, at first gruff and suspicious (—"Wait and see: he will clean us out good and plenty"—), came reluctantly to accept him. Ahmed, the Somali, accepted him. After a month it was hard for Claude to recall what it had been like before the boy came among them.

He did not know his age. ("All right," said Claude, "we will give you an age: fourteen.") Nor did he know where he came from, or who his parents were, or where, if ever, he had had a home. As long as he could remember he had lived in the streets of Harar, sleeping where he could, eating scraps, foraging, scavenging, stealing, being caught, being beaten . . . until at last the night had come when he had been caught but not beaten.

"And now at last, sidi, I have a home," he said.

(())

Dear M. Gorbeau. . . . The consignment shipped from Aden as of August 4 has been received, in good condition except for certain items of tinware dented in transit. I am writing Nomoury in Zeila directing him to take greater care in the packing of caravan loads. . . . In my own current shipment, which this letter will accompany, you will find a new, and I think better, grade of raw opopanax gum. . . . I am glad M. Rappe was satisfied with the last accounts receivable statement. . . . Yes, I am aware that I have now been a year in Harar, but, with your permission, I should like to stay on. I am content here. And not lonely. . . .

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

He was content. "*Je suis chez moi,*" he thought. "I have found my home—my niche." He had roamed the world; he had crossed seas, deserts, mountains, continents, until he had come to the very edge of the world; and here on its edge, on its farthest margin, he belonged. The world of his birth, of his youth, was gone.

Above the entrance of the store was a sign in Arabic script that he had painted himself. It read MAISON GORBEAU, and below, in smaller letters, *C. Morel, gérant.* Yes, he had his niche. He "belonged." He belonged more thoroughly, more truly, than any of the other *ferangi* in Harar—than Hajj Pasha the Egyptian or Spiranthos the Greek or Mardik the Syrian or Father Lutz the Alsatian—for he alone lived wholly the life of a Harari. Each of the others, in varying ways, had brought with him something of his past, of the world he had come from: in his clothing, his habits, his language, his race, his religion. He, Claude, had brought only himself.

Dear Mother, he wrote, *I am very busy here, very industrious. I work ten, twelve, fourteen hours a day. And on Sundays, sixteen, for the greater glory of the Lord.*

When work was done, when day was done, he would sit at ease on the veranda or under the jacaranda tree, and there Vayu brought him his supper. The boy, he had soon discovered, was remarkably bright. Though he had not, of course, had an hour of schooling in his life, he was curious and quick to learn.

The months passed. In the hill country to the northwest—the long spur of the Abyssinian highlands known as the Chercher—there were stirrings of trouble. In Harar things went on as before. The Egyptian garrison kept order; the caravans came and went; the Moslem Hararis, accustomed to life in a city of mixed breeds, made trouble neither for the Abyssinian Coptic minority nor for the tiny Catholic flock of Father Lutz. But, roundabout, the violence spread, the rumblings grew louder. . . .

The fighting was only to the north and west. The caravans—Abou Dakir's caravans—moved back and forth unmolested

THE DAY ON FIRE

between Harar and the coast, and the goods of Maison Gorbeau (*C. Morel, gérant*) moved with them. One day, however, a caravan that was not Abou Dakir's arrived in the market square; or, rather the tattered remnant of a caravan, for all that was left of it were five loadless camels and two half-starved and terrified drivers. It had been attacked, the drivers reported, near the oasis of Biyo Kaboba; its proprietors, an Italian and an Armenian, both new to the desert, had been killed, along with the rest of the drivers; and these two had barely escaped with their lives and struggled on to Harar. . . . It had been a raid in the old style—for plunder. And the plunder had vanished into the desert.

" . . . Ah yes, a true misfortune," echoed Abou Dakir, when, a few weeks later, he came to Harar and again paid a visit to Maison Gorbeau. "But alas, these two gentlemen, these *ferangi*, did not understand the hazards of the country. Africa is in ferment; the desert seethes with unrest; yet they were either unarmed, or, having arms, did not know how to use them. And so—" He shrugged like the others. Then he added: "But there is no need for me to tell you such things, Sidi Morel, for you are no longer a *ferangi*. You know the desert—Africa—the problems of trade and transportation."

"Say, rather, I am still learning them, Sidi Abou," said Claude.

"Very well, learning. But learning well." The old Arab looked around the store. "I see your shelves and bins are full," he said. "Your business prospers, I gather. And the caravan service: that is still satisfactory? We strive to please our customers, of course, but it is not always easy. There are problems and hazards: such hazards as recently befell these unfortunate *ferangi*." He paused and fixed his eyes on Claude. "I have found myself wondering," he went on—"if you might not be interested in again trying your hand with the caravan trade."

"I?" Claude returned his gaze, curiously. "No," he said. "No, Sidi Abou, I think not."

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

"Your one venture was successful. You could be successful again. You have courage, confidence, resolution. But you are also reasonable. You have come to a world that is strange to you, but you have not tried to change it to suit yourself; to change a continent and a civilization from what they are into what you might wish them to be."

"That," said Claude, "might present certain difficulties."

"Quite. Quite. Yet it is astonishing how many Europeans attempt it. You are a young man," he went on, "and I am an old one. Recently, I have recognized the need of finding a younger man to travel in my stead and assume the supervision of my caravans. My thoughts turned first, of course, to my own sons. But—it is not pleasant for a father to say this, yet I must. I am a rich man, as you know; and they are a rich man's sons—soft, lazy, and incompetent. And that is why I have come to you: to ask if you would be interested in such an assignment."

"To run your caravans between here and Zeila?"

"No, not to Zeila. That is routine, easy; my assistants have been doing it for years. I am thinking of far greater enterprises: of my caravans to the south. You have seen them, of course, here in the market square, as they pass through Harar."

Claude nodded. "In short, you are suggesting I become a slaver."

"Words, Sidi Morel, have different meanings on different tongues. If it will please you more, let us say you will still be a merchant, with an expanded inventory. This would still be your headquarters, your place of business, but you would make, say, one trip a year. To the south, the Ogaden, the Web Shebeli, and beyond: into the heart of black Africa. For your firm you would bring back gold, ivory, gems, whatever wealth you can find, and for me you would bring my particular form of wealth. At a generous commission. If you are concerned as to what your firm might say to this, there is no reason for them to learn of it; you will be a thousand miles removed from the

THE DAY ON FIRE

prying eyes of Aden. Monsieur Gorbeau will get his gold, ivory, and the rest, in far greater quantities and more cheaply than he can get them here. I shall get what I want. And you will profit from both. Whatever you earn now in a year I promise you you will make tenfold in one trip to the south. And after a few years, a few trips, you will be one of the rich men of Africa."

Abou Dakir was silent. He waited. Claude shook his head.

"You will not do it?"

"No. Thank you, but—no."

Abou Dakir rose. His retinue ranged itself for his departure. "Well, so be it," he said. "You are a strange one, all right—even stranger than I had thought. In my experience of men, there are two things that they crave above all others, and these are women and wealth. But with you, I see, it is different. Until we meet again, Sidi Morel," he said, bowing.

(())

The rains grew heavier, the nights colder. Up from the valley, across plain and desert, crept the long caravans of the damned: backs bloody under the lash, eyes rolling, knees buckling, the smallest and weakest falling at last, while the hyenas moved closer. In the mountains, and behind them, were the raids, the gunfire, the burning villages, the cries of "*Allah!*" and "*Mirian!*"—the cries of the wounded, the raped, the maimed, the destroyed. And beyond these, still farther, watching, waiting, were the newcomers, the *ferangi*, the barbarians of the north, with their boots and beads and Bibles and bigger guns, moving warily in toward bloody conquest. Africa trembled. Soon it would be convulsed. It would be no longer the black but the red continent—red with the blood of multitudes.

But in the city on the hillside it was neither black nor red, but quietly gray with weaving mist; and in the snug room above the store teacher and pupil sat together as Claude opened the gates of the world to the boy's seeking mind. Vayu had learned the fundamentals of letters and numbers, and now quickly

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

they moved on to reading and writing, to more advanced arithmetic, to the elements of geography and history, language and science. Generally at night they read together, but one night they did not read. Instead, they sat together before the fire, and Vayu took his *krar* and strummed it, while he sang the sad sweet songs of old Harar. Claude closed his eyes, and the fire-gleam touched his lids. Then he opened them, and in the gleam was Vayu, singing. The light touched his moving hand. It touched his arm, his shoulder, the smooth brown-gold of his young body, the singing lips, the cheeks, the eyes. The eyes as deep and gentle as the eyes of a fawn. The eyes that now met his own and smiled. The firelight seemed no longer to come from beyond Vayu. He was part of the fire, child of the fire; child of the sun and moon and stars, of all light everywhere; and Claude felt the light, he leaned toward it, he reached out to it.

"Dear boy," he said. "Dear boy—"

The words hung in stillness.

Vayu did not move. For a moment Claude did not move. Then he stood up.

"What is it, sidi?" the boy asked. "What is wrong?"

He did not answer. He wheeled and went to the door. The boy called after him. But he did not turn. He went out onto the balcony and down the stairs and through the courtyard into the market square. Crossing the square, he entered a street beyond, and for the rest of the night he walked the streets. No one was abroad. The city slept wrapped in darkness. Only the hyenas were not asleep: prowling the darkness, following him, circling him: watching him steadily with their yellow eyes.

((7))

THE WALLS were down again, and the eyes watched him through the broken stones. The voice spoke to him, the hand

THE DAY ON FIRE

reached out white and dead from the past; and he knew that, however far he had fled, through the miles and the years, it had yet not been far enough. He had returned within himself—in permitting himself again to think, to feel, to come alive—and the mouth of hell had reopened to receive him.

He groped again through hell. The hell of self. The hell of solitude. And now his outward life underwent still another change. He let Egal and Vayu run the store. He did nothing. He sat alone.

Vayu brought him his evening meals, but he scarcely touched them. And the boy said, "Sidi, what is wrong? You are sick. I can see."

"No, I am not sick," he said.

He sat alone. He waited. And when a few weeks later, Abou Dakir again appeared in Harar, he went to see him.

He wrote to Gorbeau: *The time has come, I am convinced, for us to extend our range still farther: into the area south and west of here, the true heart of Africa. It is there that the real wealth of the continent lies: gold, silver, gems, ivory, the hides of strange beasts, the plumes of strange birds—all of untold potential value in the markets of Europe. Thus far, as you know, I have been able to buy such items only in small quantities and at the high prices charged by Arab traders. But now the opportunity has been presented for me to go south myself, and by the time you receive this I shall already be on my way. During my absence the store will be in charge of my assistant, Egal, a competent and trustworthy man, and routine business will proceed as usual. I shall write again immediately upon my return, with what I am confident will be an extraordinary report. But just when that will be it is of course hard to say.*

And to his mother: *I am about to leave on an extended business trip, and it may be some time before you next hear from me. When you do, however, it will, I think, be with a remittance many times the amount that I have thus far been able to send you.*

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

He assembled his trade goods. He conferred with Abou Dakir.

Soon he was busy with final preparations: supervising the loading, checking his trade goods, conferring with Nasruddin, the Arab in charge of the transport. And by midmorning all was ready. As caravan leader, he would ride at its head, preceded only by two foreguards with ready guns; so it was he who first mounted his kneeling camel, swayed upward, and moved slowly off toward the southern gate. Egal and Vayu watched from the steps of the store, and, as he went, they waved and called after him. He raised a hand in return, but did not call back. Nor did he look back as he crossed the square.

Forward:

the march, the burden and the desert. . . .

To whom have I sold myself?

What lies shall I uphold?

In what blood tread?

But there was no answer. In the fields beyond Harar there was no lie, no blood, no desert.

Indeed, many days—even weeks—would pass before the caravan would have any function save simply to move on. The sources of gold, ivory, and such were still far to the south, and so too were the sources of the merchandise which the others were seeking. For this was still Moslem country. And Abou Dakir, however ruthless otherwise, however easy the prey that presented itself, would under no circumstances permit his men to touch peoples of their own faith.

(())

Bubassa was the farthest south that Claude had previously gone. And beyond it the country changed. Here at last was the landscape, not of northern, but of central Africa. Descending onto the plain, they came to the villages of the upper

THE DAY ON FIRE

Ogaden. These were merely tiny huddles of mud-and-grass huts, thrown up for shelter by the nomadic tribes while their cattle grazed a certain area, and then to be abandoned when the herds moved on. Then the last village was behind them. The last men, last huts, last grazing herds of scrawny cattle. They moved on into the empty plain.

Or, rather, the plain that had seemed empty from the distance, for now that they were on it Claude found that it teemed with life. Gazelle and antelope were everywhere, moving in great waves across the scrubland. There were hartebeest, wildebeest, wild pig, zebra. There were giraffe and ostrich, their long necks swiveling as they peered warily from above the thorn trees, their long legs carrying them swiftly off across the grassland; and birds by the myriad thousand. They were not yet in the country of elephant or buffalo, but, as they moved on, they came to an occasional rhinoceros and in the shallows of the now-sluggish streams were hippopotamus.

The caravan shot for food, and sometimes sport; not a single animal at a time, but by the dozen, by the score. And now Claude, too, began to shoot—for hides. With a squad of men to help him as trackers and beaters, he ranged back and forth across the line of march, finding game everywhere, and soon a whole string of the camels and mules were laden with his prizes. Indeed, as a hunter he now won the respect of the slavers: partly for his marksmanship, which, with practice, had become excellent; even more for his apparent lack of fear at even the most dangerous of encounters.

He rode, he hunted, he shot, he killed. He ate and slept and rose and moved on again. And that was all of life, all he asked of it: to move on. Since the days of his boyhood when he had trudged out from Cambon onto the dusty roads—when he had set sail for the horizon in the Drunken Boat of his dreams—he had been truly alive, truly his own self, only in movement; in bursting out from the walls that held him; in moving on always, toward the ends of the earth, toward the sun and the stars.

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

As he was moving now. As each night he sat out before his tent, alone, and watched Fomalhaut blaze in the southern sky. As each day he rode on beneath the flame of the sun . . . farther, deeper, into the void of the miles.

(())

For five days they rode—across the plains, across the red earth and seas of grass—and toward evening of the fifth, they came at last to the river called the Web Shebeli. They spent three days on its bank, resting and renewing their strength. According to Nasruddin, the nearest of the black tribes lived several days' journey from the south bank, as did the Moslems from the north, leaving the river and its marginal country as empty frontier between two Africas. It was crossed only at long intervals by scouts or raiding parties from either side, and by such travelers as the men of Abou Dakir.

On the fourth morning, leaving the Shebeli valley, they topped a range of hills; and beyond the hills a new world spread before them. For here, at last, there were other hills, squat and massive, tiering away into the silent miles; and between the hills, valleys; and in the valleys, streams and greenness.

The next day, for the first time, they moved warily and circuitously. And ahead, now, went a small patrol, searching each new vista with sharp eye and ready gun.

Then two hills rose close together, ahead, and they passed between them, topping a long draw and looking out from its crest across a sweep of valley. And Nasruddin nodded. "Yes," he said, "we are in Worombu country." But there was no sound to be heard, no wisp of smoke rising from forest or brushland. As they descended the slope toward the valley floor it was through stillness immense and absolute.

As the afternoon passed, the sky darkened. The sun receded. A wind rose. Where silence had been was now the hum of the wind, and from behind it, presently, came a deeper wilder sound—the sound of thunder. It roared above them in

THE DAY ON FIRE

the sky, and the sky was black and streaked with lightning, then sky and earth alike grew dim and vanished in a tide of rain.

Through the rain Claude rode hooded on the swaying back of his camel. The advance patrol, out ahead, was lost in deluge and murk, and so too was the long file of the caravan plodding behind. He was alone in the rain—as he was alone within himself. He had, with each passing day, sunk more deeply into his own apartness, his own identity. And what was his identity? Who was he now, this Claude Morel?

Hunter? Trader? . . . No, no more. Not now. He was something else now. A slaver. A leader of slavers. Across his knees, under his burnous, his gun lay ready—for men. For slaves. The gun was king, and he was king, the king of slavers, come to claim his kingdom in the land of darkness.

And yet, to *him*, not unknown; to him long familiar, through all the years of his life. . . . For it was no new journey on which he had come; it was an old journey, the eternal journey. *From the same desert, in the same night, always his eyes had waked, always:* to the silver star, the star in the south: to the Magi's journey.

He was a slaver.

He was also a pilgrim.

And it was the pilgrim, now, who rode on into darkness; who watched the darkness slowly brighten, the whirlwind slacken, the rain cease; and behind the storm was the sky, the sky of evening, immense and shining in deep violet-blue. Across its breadth arched a rainbow, and beneath the rainbow the earth, too, shone and gleamed in the light of the setting sun. And this, also, he had seen before. It was the land of dream that he had known as a boy, and left, and lost, and forever sought through the years of his journey. The land of illusion: *fabulous . . .*

. . . and false . . .

For now illusion faded. The sun had gone, and the rainbow, and the great vistas, and around him were rock and trees and hills, gray in evening light. "It will soon be time to stop

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

for the night," he thought. And then he rounded the spur of a hill and, beyond it, found the advance patrol waiting. "We have found them, sidi," its leader reported. "They are in the next valley."

(())

Behind Claude the whole caravan had halted. One of the men was sent back to summon Nasruddin, and the leader continued with his report; but Claude scarcely heard him. What he heard was another sound, beyond the voice, deep and rhythmic. A sound that now, he knew, was not illusion. The sound of drums.

Then Nasruddin rode up. There were questions and answers. The patrol had gone perhaps a mile beyond their present point and, topping the next rise in the land, had looked down upon a Worombu village.

"The men are just back from a hunt, I think," said the patrol leader, "and are preparing a feast."

"So?" said Nasruddin. "It could not be better. All night they will eat and drink and dance, and in the morning they will still be drunk or asleep. It will be easy. I suggest we make our camp here. Then late in the night we move, so that at dawn we are on the top, and ready. We will enter the village in two ranks: the first, fully armed, to take care of the men; the second with whips and chains to round up the women and children. It should take little fighting. In a few minutes all should be finished."

The word went back along the line of the caravan. The pack animals were deployed and unloaded, the men prepared their supper. When they had eaten they sat about, readying their guns and cartridges. The moon rose: a half-moon, gold and gleaming. And in its dim light they lay on the ground and slept, wrapped in their burnouses. Claude did not sleep. He lay on the ground, as did the others, but his eyes were open. He watched the moon and stars. The camp was silent now, and utterly still, save for the occasional shifting movements of

THE DAY ON FIRE

tethered animals. But from beyond the stillness came the other sound: the drums.

An hour passed. Another. The drumming continued. The moon climbed the black miles of the sky, and still Claude watched it; watched the stars. Still the drums sounded, filling the night, filling his blood and his brain.

It was two.

In the dead of night, Claude rose. Moving quietly between the sleeping figures, he passed the tethered grazing animals, and when presently he looked back there were only the trees, and the camp was gone.

(())

The hill was neither high nor long. As he ascended, the beat grew quickly louder, more pervading.

The brightness of flame seared the night. For a few moments Claude stood motionless, transfixed, on the crest of the hill. And then he was moving again. Down into the valley before him, toward the village, the flames. As he descended, the drums beat still louder, ever louder, and now, within the beat, he could hear the shouts and cries of human voices. And still he went on, through the forest, through darkness—until again the darkness brightened and, ahead, he saw the great ring of bonfires on the bank of the river, and around it were huts of wattle and thatch, and within it the clearing—and the Worombu.

He moved to the very edge of the forest. He saw the dancers. He saw the long files, the thumping feet, the swaying bodies; the bodies black, naked, glistening; teeth glistening bright, and eyes, and plumes and beads. The drums were wilder now, the dancers frenzied: on one side the men, on the other the women, the two lines approaching each other, withdrawing, approaching again, the men shouting, the women shrilling, their bodies alike convulsed and leaping in savage rhythm. At the center of the men was one taller than the rest: tall with feathers, bright with beads, his feet pounding, his arms flailing, leaping high against the flames: the men's leader—the chief—the

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

Black King. And opposite him a woman: tall, too, and black and naked, her blackness gleaming, leaping, whirling, dancing: the chief's woman—the Queen.

(())

Claude stepped out from the forest. He moved past the huts and the fires and into the clearing and stopped. The drums stopped. The dancing stopped. The only sound left was the crackling of the fires.

For a long staring moment the Worombu stood motionless. If they were going to attack, it would be now. But they did not attack. Instead, the tall one, the chief, raised a hand and made a single guttural sound, and instantly the women scattered, and vanished into the huts. There was another pause. Then he spoke again. And the men moved forward. Approaching Claude, they made a circle around him. They were drunk: with dance, with palm wine, with the frenzy of their revels. Their eyes rolled whitely. Their beads and feathers glittered in the firelight.

Claude, too, did not speak, but merely held out his hands, open and empty, to show that he had no weapon.

Then he said, "I am your friend. Your brother."

He spoke in one of the Shankalla dialects that he had learned from south-country Negroes in Harar. But there was no response. He tried one of the Bantu tongues. He said again, slowly, clearly, "I am your friend. Your brother."

And this time there was a change. There was recognition. A murmur passed through the great circle around him, and the chief—the tall one—moved slowly forward.

"But there are others near," Claude said, "who are not brothers." He pointed toward the forest and the hill beyond. "There is a caravan of Arabs. Of slavers. They will come soon. So you must go—go fast. To the south, to the forests. And hide."

Still the chief stood motionless. Then suddenly he turned. He shouted, and the night rang to the sound of his voice. . . . For a few moments it was the only sound, and then the others, too,

THE DAY ON FIRE

broke their silence. Swiftly, the murmur rose; it was broken by grunts and cries; and the cries rose and multiplied until they became one cry, a concerted howling and roaring that filled the clearing and the firelit darkness. The drums reawakened: rolling, booming. The chief leaped to the beat—higher, wilder than the rest—arms flailing, face raised to the moon. And beside him now appeared a new figure, a witch doctor, masked and horned, with painted body.

As the shriek continued there was another change. The circle had broken. The men were milling about the clearing, running in all directions—to the clearing's edge, between the fires, into the huts. When they emerged from the huts they were still running, still leaping and howling, but now in their hands they carried spears and clubs and shields. Massing in the center of the clearing, they stamped and shouted themselves into an ever-wilder frenzy around the now demonic figures of the chief and witchman, and then, with a mighty roar, broke toward the forest and the hill beyond.

Since he had last spoken, Claude had been ignored, forgotten. But now he tried to interpose himself. He stepped again in front of the chief. "No! No!" he said—and now he too was shouting, yelling, straining to raise his voice above the tumult. "Go the other way—escape—take your women and children. . . . You cannot fight them, attack them. They are too strong. They have—"

Then the tide overwhelmed him. Something struck him on the back, throwing him forward, and he fell to his knees. Trying to rise, he was struck again, fell again, and rose a second time—only to see a club hanging poised close above him. He saw the club descend; he felt it strike, felt the impact, the shock. And then saw nothing, felt nothing . . .

. . . Until, presently, he was again conscious of movement. And of pain. The movement was his own, and he was still trying to rise; and the pain was within his head, like the throb and beat of the drums. . . . But the real drums, now, were silent.

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

A faint sound came to him—not from the fires, not from the village, but from farther away—and, raising his eyes, he looked beyond the village, beyond the treetops of the forest, to the hill in the north, and on the crest of the hill he saw torches and running figures against the sky. . . . Then he too was running. Across the clearing, toward the forest, toward the hill and what lay behind it. . . . Reaching the forest's edge, he found a path and followed it, still running, stumbling, swaying. There was no sound save the thump of his feet on the packed earth of the trail. . . . And then that sound, too, was gone. The earth had opened into a pit; he was falling, pitching forward. In the darkness a spike struck his leg; and still he fell, twisting, writhing—there was pain, there was blackness.

And then nothing.

(())

Out of nothing, later—much later—came the flickering of light. The blackness was gone. Above, beyond the rim of the pit, were trees and sky and dappled sunshine. Around him the walls rose vertically, and spaced between them, erect and spearlike, were the dozen-odd wooden spikes of the animal trap. Claude got slowly to his feet, and the knee ached, but the pain was bearable.

For several moments he listened, but heard no sound, and suddenly he felt the impulse to call out. . . . To whom? . . . He did not call. He began trying to climb the walls. His head throbbed; his knee ached and trembled; there seemed no ounce of strength left in bone or muscle. But at last clawing and writhing, he pulled himself up onto the forest trail.

The trail was empty and still.

He moved slowly along the trail toward the village, and around a bend came upon the first dead: a Worombu lying face down, arms flung out, with a bullet hole high in his spine. A bit farther on was a second body; then two close together. Claude came to the clearing and saw the village. Or what had been the village, for it was that no longer. It was an ash heap,

THE DAY ON FIRE

a charnel. Every hut was gone, burned to the earth, and here the dead lay, not singly or in pairs, but by the dozen and the score. Most were Worombu—male Worombu—black, naked, crumpled, their feathers and beads forming a bright nimbus around them against the gray of ash and cinder. But there were a few women too, and children, and, scattered widely about, an occasional figure in Arab burnous and kaffiyah.

What had happened was as clear in Claude's mind as if he himself had been witness. The Worombu, wild, drunk, and howling had poured into the next valley to attack the caravan camp; but long before they reached it the sentries had heard them, the camp was ready; ready with a force unknown and omnipotent—the new king of Africa—the gun. And at the first volley the savages had turned and fled. They had fled back across the hill into their valley, to their village, and the slavers had followed, and this was what was left. Claude raised his eyes past the treetops to the hill. The caravan and its human booty were by now probably a full half-day's march away to the north or east.

"I am the survivor," he thought. "I have come to the far place. To the black savages, my brothers. And now my brothers are gone, and I survive."

He moved through the clearing to the riverbank. Crouching beside the water, he drank.

For a while he sat by the river—the flowing water—the water of life. Then he returned to the place of the dead. At the clearing's edge he stopped, and suddenly he was conscious of a change, of something different. For an instant he was truly a savage himself, frozen with awe and terror. . . . The dead had risen. . . . Then he saw more clearly. He saw a standing figure, a woman's figure, black and with staring eyes.

He called out, and the call was high and wild in the stillness. Hobbling as fast as he could, he crossed the clearing and called again, but there was no response, no hint of movement. He took a few more steps, and his knee buckled, and he fell. Trying to rise, he fell again, and this time he lay where he had fallen.

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

He slept . . . and woke. And waking, he was conscious of change. An inward change. But at first he did not know what it was. Then, suddenly, he did know: he was hungry. In the place of death he was alive—and hungry. And after a few minutes he rose to his feet. His knee shook but held him; his head ached but was clear.

Among the dead were the few slavers who had fallen. Here in this world a gun was of such importance that the survivors would have retrieved all they could; but there was at least a chance that they had missed one in the wild confusion, and now, picking his way through the mud, between the corpses, he made his search and presently he held a gun in his hands. In a pouch at the man's waist he found a dozen bullets; on the other men more bullets, to a total of almost fifty.

Sitting at the edge of the clearing, he cleaned the gun with his own tattered clothing. There was now no game to be seen; but it would come with darkness.

Then it was dark, it was night. And he must have slept, for when he next looked up the night was filtered with silver and the moon stood already high above the treetops. It was not, however, the moon that had wakened him—but a sound; a sound low and close, a sound in the clearing. And now, peering across the clearing, he saw what had made it. He saw the shadows moving.

He heard the tearing of flesh and the crunch of bone, as the hyenas held their feast in silver darkness. He reached for the gun. He picked a pair of eyes, raised the gun, fired; and the eyes sank, the shadow sank, and the other shadows turned, ran, and vanished. There was neither sound nor movement in the clearing as he went out toward its center and dragged the carcass back to the edge of the forest.

(())

The carcass lay beside him in the morning. But it was not at the carcass that he looked. It was beyond it, along the edge of the forest, at the woman who stood watching him.

THE DAY ON FIRE

This time she did not run. As he sat up and then rose she remained utterly still; nor did she move as he approached, except to crouch and bow her head.

He stood before her and said in Bantu, gently: "I shall not hurt you. Do not be afraid."

But if she understood, she gave no sign. She remained crouched and mute, her eyes staring. And then the eyes moved past him to the carcass of the hyena.

"I shall not hurt you," he repeated. "See, I have food. We shall eat."

The hollowness of hunger filled him, and, leaving her, he returned to the carcass. He bent over it—and stopped—for in that instant it occurred to him that he had no knife.

Turning, he saw that the woman had approached silently until she was standing close by, and in her hand, held out to him, was a spearhead of sharpened stone. He took it from her and smiled and again bent to the carcass. When he rose it was to see the woman squatting over a pile of brushwood, rubbing two other spearheads together. And in a moment there were sparks. And in another, fire.

The meat was tough. Its smell was strong and nauseous. But they ate ravenously. Since wakening he had been aware of nothing but hunger—and the woman—but now, suddenly, he was again conscious of where he was; of the mud and ash and flesh of the charnel that once had been a living village. . . .

He did not look at the clearing as they took their departure. Nor did the woman. This was her village, her home that they were leaving; that lay in ruins, destroyed. Perhaps earlier—on the day before, while he had lain unconscious in the pit—she had come back to the village and wailed and howled among the dead. But she did not now; and he was grateful. The dead were dead. The gone were gone. And they remained.

(())

It had taken the caravan four days to travel from the Web Shebeli to the valley of the Worombu. It took them nine to

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

make the journey in reverse. Throughout the journey the woman spoke scarcely a word, and Claude little more. Their life had no kinship to words. To live was to move, to find food, to find water, to eat, drink, rest—and move on.

They came at last to the river; they remained by the river. Throughout that night and the next day; and then the next and the next.

Her name was Nagunda.—Or something like Nagunda. When he had asked her it had been no more than a murmur on her lips. Time flowed like the river: slowly, gently. The days came and went, the sun rose and set, and the moon waned from full to half to nothing—and the nights were dark—until it reappeared and swelled and grew, and then at last, again, was round and full. He hunted. He fished. He bathed. He lay on the moss of the bank at night, with Nagunda—and when the sun reappeared he arose and again hunted their food.

For a month the sun alone had been his calendar, but now the hunt too was a teller of time, for his supply of bullets was running low. He had fifteen left, and then a dozen, and then ten. And on the day he used the next he returned to Nagunda and said, "The time has come for us to go."

Again she asked no question. She spoke no word. They walked for the rest of that day, and then the next, and half the next; and then they came to a ford and crossed it, and on the far side cut diagonally northeastward toward the caravan trail. On the fifth day from the Web Shebeli they came to the first of the Ogaden villages.

Nagunda was afraid. She trembled. But he took her arm, and she walked on, and they reached the center of the village and the assembled tribesmen.

"*Allah maak,*" he said. "*Salaam aleikum.*"

"*Salaam,*" said their chief. "And who are you?"

"I am a traveler from the south. I am on a journey to the north."

"What do you want here?"

"I want two camels. And food. And cloth."

THE DAY ON FIRE

The men looked at him. They looked at his gun. At Nagunda. "What can you give in exchange?" said the chief. "This gun? This woman?"

"One camel," said another, "is worth twenty women."

"No, not the gun or the woman," Claude said. "I shall give you money. Gold and silver."

He took coins from his money belt and held them out. They glittered in the sunlight. And the eyes of the tribesmen glittered too.

There was a consultation. Then the chief gave orders, and three men went off in various directions. After a while they returned: one leading two camels, one with a length of cloth, one with two sacks containing flour and dried dates. They took the money in exchange.

For himself, from the new cloth, Claude fashioned a crude burnous that kept off the sun, and for Nagunda a sort of robe of the kind worn by Somali women.

They moved on toward the north—toward the end of the journey. The sun rose and set and rose again, and they were alone under the sun. A man and a woman.

((8))

IT WAS Egal who saw them first. He was standing on the stoop of Maison Gorbeau, talking with a Somali trader, and suddenly he raised his head and stared—and continued staring—and then ran out across the market square as fast as his short crooked legs could carry him. "Sidi!" he cried. "Sidi, it is you! You have come back. It is you! Oh sidi, sidi!" said the little Arab. "We had thought you were dead. We heard from the men of Abou Dakir that you were lost—had disappeared. That the savages had killed you."

"No, they did not kill me. I got away."

"Thanks to Allah."

Egal released him at last. . . . "But now come," he said.

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

"You have walked, yes? You are tired, thirsty. Come in and rest, and I will bring you coffee. Ah, it is so fine, sidi—such a surprise. And the new sidi—he will be so surprised—"

"The new sidi?"

"Yes. You do not know, of course. He has been here now for some months, and—"

But by now they were up the steps and in the store. To the right was the office, and the door was open, and Claude saw the man at the desk inside. He saw the balding head and glinting glasses bent to an open ledger; and then he entered the office, and the head was raised, and he met the quick sharp glance of Monsieur Marcel Rappe.

(())

Claude did not go back to work for Maison Gorbeau. Vayu had disappeared, and the sign above the store entrance now read: MAISON GORBEAU: *M. Rappe—Gérant.*

He did not go back. He found a room in a house on one of the steep streets off the market square, and he and Nagunda moved in.

Dear Mother, he wrote: *It is many months since you have heard from me, and I hope you have not been concerned. The long trip of which I wrote you is now over, and I have come through it in good health. But unfortunately it was not a financial success; indeed, it has resulted in the termination of my employment with Gorbeau and Company; and for the time being, therefore, I shall be unable to send you further funds. This is a situation that, of course, I hope will soon be rectified.*

He went to work for Taklu Mardik. He who had been the city's leading merchant was now not a merchant at all, but a merchant's assistant, a clerk. Behind the counter of Mardik's shop he sold pins and pots and yard goods, as he had once, as a child, in another shop far away. He was no longer *monsieur le gérant* or honored sidi—a man to be reckoned with, to be deferred to—but merely one among nameless thousands in the swarming city.

THE DAY ON FIRE

Claude did not care. . . . *Qu'importe?* What did it matter? He did not consider leaving Harar, for Harar was home: as much of a home as he had ever had. "*Ici je suis chez moi,*" he had once said. "I am at home here. I have found my niche." And now he was back in his niche, and if it was smaller and more obscure than before, it was still a place that was his, in which he belonged and functioned.

The days passed. And the nights.

Then one night there was a knock on the door, and Claude opened it. A tall, young figure stood there, lithe, slender, with shining eyes. And as Claude stared, in the dim light, the figure moved closer and seized his hands, crying, "Yes—yes, it is I, Sidi Claude. It is Vayu—"

They came together into the room, "Oh sidi," the boy went on, the words tumbling upon each other, "it is so fine—so wonderful. We thought you were dead—yes—gone, lost—and I felt so sad. But today I came back to Harar—I too have been gone—and I see Egal and he tells me and so I come—I come running—"

The boy's eyes shone. He squeezed Claude's hands. And Claude pressed his hands in return, and smiled, and said, "Yes, it is good. And I am happy too. I didn't know where you were. . . . You said you have come back. You were away too, then? Where?"

"I have been out to the villages. I and Father Lutz. I am with him now."

"With him?"

"Yes, sidi. When you left I was of course still at the store. But then the new sidi came, the *ferangi*, and he did not like me. He told me to go, and I went, and for a while I was like I used to be—around the streets, with no work, no house, nothing. Then Father Lutz saw me—he took me home. He said I should stay. And I stayed. I have worked for him. I have cooked, kept clean, made errands, everything. And he has let me teach—" The boy's voice grew proud. "Yes, sidi, in the school, he lets me teach—the small boys—the alphabet and sums and how to read—and he says I have done well, and when last month he

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

goes out on a trip to the villages, he says I should come too, and I go."

Claude's smile was now full and warm. "So—I am glad, boy. It has been all right with you."

"Yes, all right, sidi. And now I will not be with the Father any longer but again with you, and we—"

He broke off, for Claude was shaking his head. "No, I have no work for you now. Didn't Egal tell you that I am no longer with Maison Gorbeau?"

"Yes, he told me. But he said you were with Mardik."

"With Mardik, yes. But only working for him. I am no longer the big sidi. I cannot hire anyone. And besides—" Claude indicated Nagunda, who was squatting silently by the brazier, preparing supper. "Besides, you see, I have someone—"

Vayu could not but have seen her when he came in the door, but for the first time he showed awareness. "She is a Shankalla?" he asked.

"She is like a Shankalla. From far to the south."

"You brought her back with you, and she takes care of you, and is your woman?"

Claude nodded. "Yes, Vayu, she is my woman."

There was a pause. The boy's face was sad. Then he looked up at Claude, and it changed and was not sad. "I am glad, sidi," he said. "For myself I am sorry, that I cannot come here and stay. But for you I am glad. You have needed a woman, sidi. Yes, I am glad."

(())

The next night there was another knock. And it was Father Hippolyte Lutz. "Welcome, my son. Welcome back," he said. "And so here you are at last. And I am glad too. Although to me, I confess, it is no great surprise. Everyone else seemed to have given you up—to think you gone, lost, dead—but not I, my son. Oh no. Our Sidi Morel will be back, I told them. He will survive, win through. His strength is as the strength of ten—though not, perhaps, for the traditional reason."

THE DAY ON FIRE

He chuckled. "So I was right and you are back," he said. "But with some changes, I see." His eyes moved around the squalid room and fixed on Nagunda, who was squatting as usual beside the brazier. "Vayu told me you had brought home a—" he hesitated, "—a companion," he said. "And that I was sorry to hear."

"Were you?"

"Deeply, my son." Lutz was no longer smiling. "I was saddened, as you know, when you went off with the men of Abou Dakir. But at least I did not think that you yourself would return with a slave."

"She is not a slave," said Claude.

"No? What then, my son?"

"She is my wife."

"Your wife?"

"Yes, exactly that. My wife. My woman. We are not what you called married. No. We have not had the sacrament of your church. . . . But still we are married. We have performed our own sacrament." Claude's eyes met the priest's and held them, and he said: "What I am saying to you is the truth. She is not a slave. We are man and wife."

There was a pause. Lutz returned his gaze. Then he turned and went to Nagunda and stood beside her. "Welcome to you too, my daughter," he said gently, in Somali. "Will you tell me your name?"

It was the first time since Claude and she had been together that anyone other than he had spoken a word to her. She raised her eyes, but only for an instant, casting them quickly down again; and she did not speak.

"Her name is Nagunda," said Claude. "I have taught her a few words of Arabic. But she is shy and afraid."

"Yes, of course she is—in such a strange new world." Stooping, Lutz laid his hand on her head. "Welcome again, Nagunda," he said in Arabic, slowly.

"There is a Shankalla woman who comes to my church," he said, turning to Claude, "and who knows the ways and lan-

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

guages of the south. With your permission I shall ask her to come here—during the day, while you are gone.”

“Yes, that would be kind of you,” said Claude. “Nagunda is by herself too much, and she is lonely.”

The priest nodded. “And you, my son?” he asked after a pause. “Is there anything I can do for you? Since I returned yesterday I have been to Maison Gorbeau and know the trouble there. I am sorry. In any case, welcome back. If I can be of any help, I shall be pleased.”

“Thank you,” said Claude, “but I have no need for a Shankalla woman. . . . Or of prayers,” he added.

((.))

The weeks passed. And the months.

He worked at Mardik’s. At first he earned barely enough for food, for rent, and for his and Nagunda’s few other basic needs. But old customers followed him to the Syrian’s shop; soon sales had increased by some fifty per cent; and in a month he had gained a raise, and in two months another.

He had work. He had a home. He was not alone.

Vayu he saw almost every day, either at the store or his dwelling. Egal, too, appeared often. Father Lutz came, dropping by now and then for a few words and trying gently and patiently to speak with Nagunda. And sometimes, returning home, Claude found his Shankalla there—a fat black woman named Onuz, who, as soon as he appeared, invariably rose and in quick silence took her leave.

Dear Mother, he wrote one evening: Your return letter has been received and there is no point in your railing at my loss of my position with Gorbeau and Company. I have, I am glad to say, now found other employment, and while it is not yet so remunerative, I have advanced rapidly, and I am happy to be able to send you at least the token amount of one hundred francs. I would like to make it more, but. . . . He paused in his writing. He looked up across the room at Nagunda; and he

THE DAY ON FIRE

smiled. . . . but I have undertaken certain obligations, he wrote, which make it impossible for me to do so at this moment. . . .

The season of rains came and passed; then the season of dryness and hot dust-laden winds. Abou Dakir did not appear, but bits of news and rumor came to Harar with the caravans: of heightening political tensions along the Red Sea coast; of British, French, and Italian maneuverings; of trouble in Cairo and the Egyptian Sudan; of continued raids by the Abyssinians into the Somali lowlands and counterraids by the desert tribes of the Emir Ismail. In the city itself all remained as before. The caravans came and went. The market place hummed.

With a string of mules laden with merchandise, Claude set out into the countryside and was gone for two weeks. The trip was successful. He sold everything he had taken and acquired many bargains in return. And Mardik was delighted and urged him to go soon again. There had been only one difficulty—that mules and merchandise together were too much for one man to handle—and it was agreed that for subsequent trips Claude must have an assistant. He was not far to find. No farther than Hippolyte Lutz's. The priest, when Claude spoke to him, sighed and said, "Well, here is where the poor boy becomes a heathen again." But he offered only token resistance. And from then on, when Claude went out on his rounds, it was as in the old days, with the boy at his side.

(())

Africa: mid-1880's. The African northeast in change, in turmoil. . . . Ten years before, with British support, Egypt had taken over this realm from Turkey. But now Egypt was no longer able to hold it. Weak and corrupt, its power was crumbling, as stronger hands moved in to pick up the fragments.

. . . . *The way the situation is developing*, wrote the British Resident in Aden to the Foreign Office in London, *is that, as usual, the continental powers are refusing to honour the con-*

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

cept of fair play. Instead of adhering to the agreement of limited spheres of influence, both Italians and French are pushing as far and as fast as possible—the former to the north, the latter to the south—and there is reason to believe that the French have designs on the province and city of Harar. If, therefore, the Egyptian occupation force is soon to be withdrawn, I urge that as a protective measure. . . .

The Foreign Office, however, had other things than Harar on its mind. For Egypt, which it had occupied and controlled for five years, was now losing its hold not only on its Red Sea outposts but on the far greater prize of the Sudan. There a stronger Moslem leader than the Emir Ismail had arisen—a desert imam, a new prophet, who called himself the Mahdi and whose followers were known as Dervishes. These had all but swept the country. They had taken its capital, Khartoum. They had killed one of the greatest of British generals, "Chinese" Gordon, who had been sent to defend it. The world of the Middle Nile was rampant, in ferment.

And, to the east, Abyssinia as well.

In 1869 the British had invaded Abyssinia, to effect the release of a mission that had been held captive. The victors had installed John, king of the northern province of Tigré as emperor, and withdrawn, leaving the country independent, as it had been through the centuries. And since then John had ruled as Negus Negusti—King of Kings—in theory over all Abyssinia, but effectively only over the north; for in the central highlands, in Shoa, had risen a younger king, Menelik. Menelik claimed direct descent from his ancient namesake, son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. It was he, he avowed, who should be King of Kings, in his mountain capital of Ankober—not John, the British protégé, in Tigré's city of Axum.

Africa seethed. Africa rumbled. . . .

Qu'importe?

In a room off a steep narrow street, some few hundred yards from Hajj Pasha's palace, Claude Morel sat beside his woman,

THE DAY ON FIRE

Nagunda. He still worked for Mardik. But now he went only occasionally into the countryside. He sat beside Nagunda. He did not talk to her, but simply sat, and watched the miracle that had taken visible form in her flesh.

For what had happened *was*, to him, a miracle. Through all his life, as boy and man, he had been a creature apart from other men: first as poet, prophet, seer, child of dream and fire, self-ignited and self-consumed; then as the relict of that consumption, a man of ashes, fragments. For years he had scarcely believed his own self to be alive—yet now that self had proved capable of creating a new life beyond it.

He sat beside Nagunda. Night came, and he lay beside her, and in the darkness, through the hours of the night, he thought of his son. For that was part of the miracle: that he *knew* this: that it was a son, a boy, a man-child.

In those dark nights his thoughts ranged forward, multiplying. . . . His son must be strong, enduring, courageous. He must face the world without anger or fear. From his mother he would inherit the primitive power of the savage, from himself the mind and skills of civilized man. He himself would educate him—as he had Vayu—but earlier and better; he would give him the gift of tongues, the fruits of his travels, the grist of his own experience and knowledge. And when he could give no more, he would send him away—to Europe, to France. France had its faults, God knew (if not the French), but at least it was not fouled by racial hatreds, as were England and America, and a boy half-French and half-African would be accepted as any other. He would go to the heart of France, to Paris, the university; but not to the Sorbonne—no, not to the place of words—but to the other place, the place of facts, of science, the *Ecole Centrale*. His son would be a builder, a creator. He would learn all that France, that Europe, could give. But he would not stay there. He would return to Africa. For Europe was the past and Africa was the future, and this was a man of the future, not of the nineteenth but of the twentieth century; and he would return to the land of the future, to build it.

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

He would clear jungles, level mountains, water the deserts, bring light where there was darkness and wealth where there was poverty. It would be he, and such as he, who would change the face of Africa, and of the earth; who would be the *voyants*, the thieves of fire, the alchemists of the world to come. And for them, unlike the alchemist of words, there would be no day of reckoning, no pit of hell, for their vision, their dream, would be not inward but outward. They would deal not in illusion and hallucination, but in reality, the blood and bones of life; and reality would not consume them but make them free.

The free-men. The world-men. And among them his son.

(())

Dear Mother, he wrote: *In my last letter I referred to "certain obligations" I had undertaken, and now I must report that these obligations have increased. Not to be cryptic about it any longer, I am now . . . he paused and considered . . . now a married man, he wrote, and in a few months' time I shall be a father. I am aware that this will come as a shock to you, and the more so when I add that my wife is not French, nor even European, but an African. But then, so am I, in many ways, now an African myself.*

At all events, it is a thing that has happened, and however displeased you may be, there are at least two aspects of which I know you will approve. One is that my wife, though not born a Catholic, seems well on her way to becoming one; and the other is that I am now faced with the necessity of making far more money than ever before. Much of what I earn—and I have definite plans on how to earn—will have to go toward the support of my family, and particularly of my son (for it will be a son), for whom I want the best training and education possible. But it will not be long, I hope, before my reserves are sufficient to send you considerable sums.

Meanwhile I am sending the usual draft for one hundred francs, together with filial greetings.

THE DAY ON FIRE

He waited. He waited for the child that was coming; and the days passed, one the same as another . . . until the day came that, suddenly, was *not* the same . . . when, leaving home in the early morning, he felt at once that the city was different; the streets, as he walked them, were different, the crowds were different; and when he came to the main square the crowd was enormous. It was packed together before the wall of Hajj Pasha's palace; and it was milling and murmuring, pressing forward, craning, shouting, for on the wall by the palace gate was a posted notice.

The Egyptians were leaving Harar. And its new ruler would be the Emir Ismail Abdullah.

(())

Taklu Mardik sat in his office; his face slack, his eyes fixed unseeing on the wall, he murmured dully: "Ten years. . . . Ten years I have been here. It has been my home, my life. And now—"

"Now what?" said Claude.

"It is all done—finished."

"You have decided, then—?"

"Decided?" The Syrian looked up at him. "What is there to decide? The decision has been made; it is there on the palace wall. The Egyptians go. The British do not come. The Emir Ismail comes with his desert bandits. We have been thrown to the hyenas. There is not a Christian, not a foreigner in Harar, who will be safe from these Moslem butchers. So we will close now," he said. "Tomorrow I will go to the Arab merchants and find a buyer for my stock, and then arrange with the Egyptians to leave with their caravan."

"Where will you go?" Claude asked.

"To the coast. Where else is there to go?" Mardik shrugged hopelessly. "Zeila, Djibouti, Aden—what does it matter?"

"And Spiranthos—he is also going?"

"Yes, he is going."

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

. . . And so, too, Claude presently learned, was Marcel Rappe. He heard it first from Egal, who came running to summon him; and then, going himself to Maison Gorbeau, found Rappe already clearing out his drawers and files.

(())

Outside, the crowd in the square was even bigger than during the morning. Claude moved through the crowd. He crossed the square, and no one molested him. Now and then a voice greeted him—"Salaam, sidi" . . . "Allah maak, sidi"—and he spoke in return, and it was the same as always. He entered a side street, and now for the first time, he was aware of disturbance, of the threat of violence; for the street was unpatrolled, and along it, suddenly, came a group of men and boys, racing raggedly by, waving sticks, shouting slogans. . . . "Harar will be free!" they cried. "Allah akbar! Down with *ferangi!* Down with infidels!" . . . But they, too, did not molest him. They raced on.

Claude moved on until he came to the house of Father Lutz. The priest was there, but not alone. As he opened the door, there appeared beside him another priest, a tall black Abyssinian *kaess* of the Coptic Church, who bowed formally to both Lutz and Claude and then moved off down the street.

"And that is how it is," said Lutz, as he led Claude in. "Through all the years I have been here no Coptic priest would so much as look at me—*un sale catholique*. But now—now that there is trouble—we are confreres, we are brothers."

"And the trouble," said Claude, "—do you think it will be bad?"

"I think it may be."

"What will you do?"

Lutz shrugged. "There is nothing to do at the moment—except to wait and hope for the best."

"You will not leave then? Rappe is leaving. Mardik and Spiranthos are leaving. A priest, above all—"

"A priest, above all, must stay at his post. The others have

THE DAY ON FIRE

produce and merchandise to think of; I have human beings, human souls." Lutz smiled wryly. "No great number, perhaps," he added. "There are more than three thousand Copts in Harar, and only some hundred Roman Catholics, but they cannot leave. There is nowhere, no way, for them to go. And my place is beside them." His voice was quiet, his manner calm and gentle. "And you, my son? Will you go or stay?"

"I shall stay," said Claude.

The priest nodded. "Yes, I thought so. It is not the same for you as for me, of course. But—"

"But this is my home," said Claude. "I am a Harari—an African. My wife is an African. My son will be an African."

(())

He wrote to Gorbeau: *As of today I signed an agreement with M. Rappe, which he will of course present to you. As you will see the purchase price for the store and stock is to be paid in installments out of my earnings. But I wish also to assure you in person that I shall do my best to live up to it. . . .*

He gave the letters to Rappe. From Rappe, in return, he received a signed paper, the keys and ledgers. And the following day, in the main square, he watched the green flag of Egypt come down from above the palace; the troops assembling, deploying; the host of laden camels. The dust rose, a bugle sounded; the crowd became a procession, and the procession moved through the square, out of the square—slowly, swaying, while the dust rose higher—and into the street that led to the north gate of the city.

Then it was gone. The rear guard was gone. And the dust settled, and it was quiet. There were still crowds in the square—crowds of Hararis who had been silently watching—but they remained silent, there was scarcely a sound or a movement among them . . .

Claude crossed the square to Maison Gorbeau. The door was closed but not locked, and inside were Egal and Vayu—Vayu

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

again, instead of the Harari clerk; and they rushed to him and seized his hands, excited, grinning, talking both at once. . . . "Ah, sidi! Welcome, sidi! . . . We three together again . . . Like in the old days. . . ."

Then they set to work. Much of the merchandise was crated and through the hours they labored at unpacking it. Now and then they rested, and Claude raised his head, listening; but it was still quiet outside.

When the change came, it was not he, but Vayu, who was first aware of it. Suddenly the boy straightened and stood still, and then he ran to the door and threw it open, and now Claude too could hear the change: in the square, in the crowds, in the whole city around them, as the murmur rose like the sound of a surging sea. . . . "They are coming—coming!" cried Vayu. "They are *here!*" . . . And he ran out and was swept up in the crowd, in the sea—and was gone.

"So, he is a boy—and a Harari. Why not?" Claude thought. And through the door, over the heads of the crowd, he saw horsemen and men on camelback entering the square, the men of the desert in white burnouses and kaffiyahs flowing up in a great tide.

Then he turned away. "You and I, Egal, let us get on with our business," he said. And closing the door, they returned to the bins while, outside, the din rose, and held, and then at last slowly faded, as the procession wound to its end in the palace courtyard.

The sunlight faded at the windows. Claude, heaving a final bolt of cloth onto a shelf, turned; and as he turned, the street door opened.

It was an Arab. Behind him were other Arabs, perhaps a dozen in all: men of the desert—tall, lean, dark-faced, some with guns, some with broad-bladed tribal swords.

"You are the *ferangi*, Morel?" the Arab asked.

"I am the Harari Morel."

"But Morel. You will come with us."

"Come with you? Where?"

THE DAY ON FIRE

"That you will learn in due time. You will come—now."

There was a pause. Claude looked again at the row of dark featureless faces. "Very well, I shall come," he said. "But first I must close the store."

"There is no need for you to close it. It is no longer yours. It is now the property of the Emirate of Harar."

Claude stood motionless, silent. The Arab waited a moment. The others waited. Then two of them sprang forward and seized Claude by the arms.

"No—no—"

The cry was from Egal, and he moved quickly to the leader. "It is his place, sidi. His lawful place. And he is a good man—a friend to all our people."

The Arab looked down at the dwarfish figure. Then he looked at his companions. "Who is this one?" he asked.

"I know him," a voice said. "He has been in this place for years. A servant, a creature of the *giaours*."

"Hah, a traitor dog—"

"No, no," Egal protested. "I am not. I am a good Harari, a good Moslem. And the sidi, he too is good. Truly, I swear to you—"

The leader's answer was a mere flick of a finger. And what happened then was so sudden, so quick, that it was no part of time at all. Out of the dimness the curved Arab blade swung—huge, shining, then gone; too fast to be seen—and all Claude saw was Egal. He saw the small gnarled body, the pointed beard, the small dark eyes; he saw them—he still saw them when the blade had passed—the eyes still open, the mouth open, as if trying to speak, as the body fell away; and then the head, too, fell; it hit the floor.

Then Claude was plunging forward. He was plunging, being swept ahead, by hands, by arms, by thrusting bodies; and Egal was gone, the store was gone, and he was out of the store, he was in the square; around him were hundreds of bodies, hundreds of voices, a tide, a roar, sweeping him on; and out of the roar he heard a voice, a single voice, a boy's, crying, "Sidi—

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

sidi—" And it was gone. The crowds and square were gone. There were only the hands thrusting him, dragging him, through doors, through halls, through growing darkness. And then the hands were gone, movement was gone, and he was alone. He was in darkness, in a place of stone, lying on a floor of stone . . . and it was quiet.

(())

His knee hurt. He did not know why, for he did not remember falling or being struck, yet it hurt with a throbbing ache that seeped inward, spreading, through his bones and blood. He had lain still for a while. Then he had sat, stood, groped his way slowly, blindly, along the walls of the cell.

No one came. There was no sound. The hours passed and still he waited . . . and then at last, in the waiting, in black stillness, there was a sound; and the door opened and an Arab guard appeared, carrying a lamp, and behind him was another Arab, smaller and older . . . and, in the lamplight, Claude saw the bland face of Abou Dakir.

"*Salaam*, my friend," said the old man. "I am sorry your accommodations have been rather makeshift. But the last night and day have been busy ones in Harar."

"You arrived with the Emir?"

"Yes, I arrived with Emir Ismail. Indeed, I am happy to say I am very close to the Emir Ismail; in fact, his new Minister of Finance and Commerce." The old man paused and cleared his throat. "And you too, if I may say so, should be happy for if I were not, we would not now be holding conversation together. The Emir Ismail is a Moslem patriot; he and his men do not take greatly to *ferangi*, to *giaours*, to infidels, and have found it necessary to purge the city. I think I am safe in saying that there are no longer many *giaours* in Harar. Nor any infidel churches, either Coptic or Catholic."

"And Father Lutz—?"

"The priest, Lutz, of course, was especially singled out," said Abou Dakir mildly. "It is unfortunate, perhaps, for he was said

THE DAY ON FIRE

to be a worthy man—but inevitable, too, in view of his position. The reports, you may be glad to know, are that he died commendably, in the best French tradition."

The lamplight wavered on the walls. The walls themselves seemed to waver in shadowed stillness.

"And now—" Claude said quietly, "—now it is my turn?"

Abou Dakir shook his head. "No," he said. "No, with you it will be different. You are not altogether a *ferangi*. You have not been killed, and you will not be. It is now night, and you will spend the rest of it here. In the morning one of my caravans is leaving for the coast. For the first few days, as a precautionary measure, you will be under guard. Then, when the desert is reached, you will be released and may travel freely."

There was a pause. Claude said nothing.

"This is clear to you?" said Abou Dakir. "You have no questions?"

"Yes, one. What of my wife? She must be told. She must be given time to prepare."

"There is no record of a wife," said Abou Dakir. "Nor was there anyone in your home when our men searched it."

"No one there?" Claude's voice seemed not his own.

"No. Inquiries were made of the neighbors, and they said there *had* been a woman there. A black woman—your servant; presumably the slave you brought back from the south. But when our occupation began, she became panicky, so it seems, and ran off."

"Ran off—where?"

"To this Lutz, the priest, they thought. For she was a *giaour*, they said; always carried a rosary. . . . And such a woman was found at the priest's. She did not die as well as he, my men reported, but that is of course to be expected of a woman."

In the stillness, the old man turned. The guard turned, and the lamp flickered.

Then he was gone. There was darkness, stillness. It was not until later that in the stillness, through the ancient stones, Claude could hear the hyenas howling in the streets of night.

((9)))

THE BOOK WAS closed. The Book of Harar. The Book of Father Lutz, of Egal, of Vayu, of Nagunda. The book of the son that never was. He was alone again. Now it was he again who walked the streets of night . . . the streets of day . . . the streets of Zeila, Djibouti, Masawa, Jidda, Hodeida, Suez, Port Sudan.

His body was bone and skin, and the skin was brown leather. His hair was the color of desert sand. His eyes were blue, depthless, unchanging: the eyes of a mask held up to an empty sky.

Now he drank again. When he worked it was for only one reason: to earn money for drink. He did not stay long anywhere. He bought his drinks, he cadged them, begged them, sometimes stole them; and he drank.

He went south to Berbera and Mogadiscio as coaler on a freighter. And in Mogadiscio he lived for a month in the hut of a Somali stevedore who had found him lying in the street. He went north again to Suez, then on to Port Said.

He was in Suez again. He was in Port Sudan, Jidda, Massawa. He was deck hand on a dhow bound for Hodeida, and then in Hodeida, in Obock—or at least he thought it was Obock—and then another town, and another, of which he did not know the names.

He moved on to the next town, the next city, the next araq, the next alley. Through the nights alone. Through the days on fire.

Then came a night, in a city, when he was not alone. He was in the city of Mocha, on the Yemen coast, where he had earned a day's wages on the wharves, and that night, he was in a waterfront bar. The bar was crowded. Claude, however, kept to himself, sitting alone at a table, in silence, the crowd unnoticed around him . . . until out of it, presently, came a voice that was different . . . he saw a face that was different . . . for the face was not brown, but pale, with red hair, and the voice,

THE DAY ON FIRE

now close beside him said in English, "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, it's the loony frog!"

Neil Fitzsimmons grinned. "Don't know me, eh?" he asked. "Don't know yer pal from the old days at Gorboo?"

Claude nodded. "Yes, I know you," he said.

"Good—good fer you, lad! On account of I know you too, and it makes us even . . . Oh, I grant ye it took me a minute or two. First thing I see ye, I says to meself, that ain't no Portuguese, no sir. But then I asks, what *is* it? Maybe one of them Egyptian mummies they been diggin' up roundabout. Then I says, no, no, it ain't that either. It's that frog, that's what—that loony Frenchy from Gorboo's."

The Irishman laughed; he thumped Claude's shoulder and sat down. "No offense, lad," he said. "But there been some changes, ye know. Like yer hair, eh?—ye look like granddad himself . . . And this—" He eyed Claude's glass. "There's been a change there too, eh? Somethin' happened to the pledge—"

He held a drink of his own, drank it down, and called for another. "Well, more power to ye, lad. Still not talkin' though, eh?" he said. "Likker or no, still the bloody sphinx." The Irishman drank again. "All right, me boy, have it yer own way." He called for another drink. "—And one for me friend too," he added. "With the compliments of N. Fitz Esquire, of Jensen and Fitzsimmons, Merchants and Entryprenoors, Limited."

Two drinks came. And they drank.

"Hear what I said, lad?" asked the Irishman. "Merchant and entryprenoor, limited—yessir—that's me . . . Oh, I don't mind sayin' I had me troubles fer a while—like you now, mebbe. Until at last, by God, I began gettin' the breaks. First it was with an A-rab, up in Port Sudan, that's got a sort of export business and needs a white man to help him out with the limeys; and I take it on and in a year I got some money in me pants, so I quit, I look around fer somethin' better—and by God, sure enough I find it. Somethin' *big* at last—the rale *thing*—and I put me money in, and I'm half of Jensen and Fitzsimmons, Merchants and Entryprenoors, Limited."

He drank again, and his lean face smirked happily.

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

"Ever hear of Swede Jensen?" he said. "He's been around these parts twenty years. . . . No? Well, ye will, I'm tellin' ye. . . . Guns: that's what he's workin' on, by God. . . . Two thousand of 'em he's got; or almost got. French guns, frog guns—what d'ye think of that, Froggy?—two bloody thousand of 'em he can have fer two francs apiece, four thousand fer the lot of 'em; only they won't sell 'em except all together, and he's got only two thousand—until who shows up but me with the other two."

Fitzsimmons' smirk became a grin. "D'ye know what we'll get fer them guns—what our friend, the nigger king, Mr. Menelik'll pay fer 'em? . . . He'll pay *fifty francs* apiece, that's what—a *hundred thousand* fer the lot that me and Swede picked up fer four. . . ."

He talked on. They drank. The glasses were full, then empty—full, then empty—and Claude felt the liquor coiling in his eyes and brain. He reached for his glass, his drink, but could not find them. They were no longer there. Nothing was there. There was murmuring, blurring, darkness—thickening darkness; around him, within; there was only darkness . . . and, through it, a long line moving—a caravan moving through the wastes toward the great hills in the west . . .

(())

He was in an alley, in a street, on a dock, on a beach.

He was in a desert.

In a town.

He was in the very pit of hell, for the city was Aden, and its black walls rose above him into the hell-fire of the sky. He sat with a gourd of araq against a crumbling wall; he drank, he drank deep, waiting—waiting for the ghosts—and they came . . . Except that this time there was a difference. For they came and went by. They did not remain. Only one remained . . . The ghost stopped, and it was not Egal, not Lutz, not Nagunda. It was a boy, his son; and yet not his son—no—for his son was dead, unborn, he had never been; and this one *was*. He existed.

THE DAY ON FIRE

He was not a ghost. He was not a boy, but a young man; and the young man stood before him in the street in Aden, and stared, and then moved closer. "Sidi, Sidi Claude—" he said. "I am Vayu. Do you not know me? It is Vayu."

(())

Vayu had not been killed. He had been made a slave. He had been given to the men of Abou Dakir and put in the slave pen in the square, and he had stayed there many days, perhaps weeks—he did not know—and then was taken out and put in chains and sent, with many other slaves, from the south, from the west, from Harar itself, in a great caravan to the coast. To what town on the coast they came, he did not know; but there they were loaded into dhows and taken across the Red Sea to Jidda, in Arabia. Here was one of the great slave markets, where they would pass from the hands of Abou Dakir to their permanent owners.

"But I was lucky, sidi," said Vayu. "In Jidda I escaped. I did not stay in Jidda, of course. As soon as I could I came to Aden. I went to Gorbeau and Company—to see if you were there; but they knew nothing about you. Since then, I have asked everywhere. I have looked everywhere. On the streets, in the stores, on the docks, on the dhows and ships coming from Africa.

(())

They were in Mukalla. They were in Shuqra. They were in Mocha.

In Mocha, Claude walked through the streets, and along the docks past the line of dhows.

And on the deck of a dhow was Neil Fitzsimmons.

The Irishman was lying on the deck, staring vacantly into space; but as Claude approached, his head turned a little, his eyes focused, then stared. And then, rising, he climbed up onto the wharf beside him. "By God, it's the Wanderin Jew again," he said. "Beg yer pardon, lad—the Wanderin' Frog. . . . Don't

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

tell me ye been hidin' out here in Mocha all this time?"

"No," said Claude.

"Been here and there, eh? Travelin' businessman. Big deals all over." Fitzsimmons laughed, but not pleasantly. "That's the way, lad," he said. "Big deals fer us all."

"And you?" said Claude. "How is yours?"

"Mine?"

"Your deal. With the guns."

"Oh. Oh, yeah." Fitzsimmons' glance drifted back to him. Suddenly, a change came over him. His voice grew harsh and savage. "Two thousand guns," he rasped, "sittin' in that bloody warehouse. A hundred thousand francs just sittin' there on its arse—"

"You can't get them to Abyssinia?"

"To Ab-y-ssinia—hah! We can't even get 'em to Tajoura. Not even across the Red Sea . . . We got the guns, we got a dhow, we're all set. And on account of them bloody frogs over there . . ."

He broke off; he was silent; he was staring straight at Claude. Then he grasped Claude's arm in the next instant, shouting: "Yer the answer! Yes, by Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, yer the bloody goddamn answer!" Then abruptly he turned to the dhow and called, "Hey Swede—Swede! Come up here! Come up here fast!"

(())

Jensen was an older man than Fitzsimmons—perhaps fifty, perhaps more—with a square red face, a bald head, and the cold blue eyes of the north.

Jensen looked Claude over: slowly, coolly. "You would like to go to Abyssinia?" he asked. "You are interested in our venture? We have a letter from Menelik, king of Shoa, who will pay much for our guns. Several months ago we were ready to go. But then there were difficulties. The only practical way to Shoa is by way of Tajoura, on the Somali coast, which is held by the French. The French said, yes, we could pass the guns

THE DAY ON FIRE

through, only at a tax of a hundred per cent of their value—and *they* would set the value. ‘That is robbery,’ I told them. ‘No,’ they said, ‘that is the tax. The tax for all foreigners.’ ‘And for Frenchmen?’ I asked. ‘For Frenchmen,’ they said, ‘there is no tax. But you are not Frenchmen.’”

“So we try everything,” said Fitzsimmons.

“Yes, we tried many things.” Jensen’s cold blue gaze was again fixed on Claude: measuring—appraising. “Of course, you are not a merchant,” he said bluntly. “Not a man of means. With you we would have to make a rather different deal than with the others we had had in mind. The guns would, of necessity, have to pass through Tajoura in your name. But it would be distinctly understood, in writing between us, that you would be in no real sense a partner. On the other hand, we would of course make the venture worthwhile for you. That we can discuss. And if you can be useful, not only for Tajoura, but in other ways, as Fitzsimmons suggests. . . .”

He talked on. Fitzsimmons spoke. Then Jensen spoke again.

But Claude heard only their voices, not the words. His eyes had moved out from the harbor to the sea beyond.

((10))

“AYEEE, AYAAA—” The camels swayed. Dust rose in sunlight.

Three months had passed since he had met Fitzsimmons for the second time in Mocha; seven years since he had last moved inward from the sea across the wastes of Africa.

Of the three months, the first week had been spent in Mocha, loading the guns, readying the dhow, and preparing a contract. Or, rather, two contracts; one (for public use) transferring all assets to Claude Morel, Citizen of France; the other (private) canceling the first.

Then they had been four days in the dhow: on the Red Sea, the Bab-el-Mendeb Straits, the Gulf of Aden, the Bay of

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

Tajoura. And Jensen's contracts (at least the public one) had been worth the labor, for at Tajoura's dockside the *chef de porte* had had to shrug, resignedly, and let them through tax free.

"Ayeee, ayaaa—"

Jensen rode at the head of the caravan. Fitzsimmons was roughly at its mid-point, and Claude, with Vayu, at the rear, to keep a watch for stragglers. As always on a caravan—and now even with Vayu—Claude rode a little apart, and in silence.

Forward: the march, the burden and the desert.

The sun blazed. It sank and set. At night they camped in the waste, pitching their tents close together, with sentries posted. They were still too close to the coast to be in wild Danakil country; and even when they reached it, it was unlikely that so large a caravan would be attacked. But Jensen was taking no chances. He ran the caravan with methodical efficiency.

Claude still had almost no personal knowledge of Jensen: of his life, his past, of what lay behind the square bland face and cold blue eyes. Whatever had gone before was hidden and lost, transfused into what was obviously the great gamble, the great enterprise, of his life. And then on the seventh morning, as he prepared to mount his camel, an adder, rearing from its burrow, struck at his leg; and in an hour he was dead.

The ground was hard and stony. From their general supplies Claude took two staves of wood, nailed them into a cross, and set the cross on the grave. And on the cross, with his knife, he carved the name of OLAF JENSEN.

They mounted and rode on, and what had happened had happened. The dust rose. The sun flamed. The cross receded behind them.

(())

Their order of march was now changed. Fitzsimmons rode in the van with the chief driver, Rashi. Claude remained in the

THE DAY ON FIRE

rear. But Vayu moved up to take Fitzsimmons' place in the middle.

The days passed: monotonous, identical. At night they pitched their tents between the sand and stars.

(())

The days passed. They became weeks. They had been traveling two weeks . . . then three . . . then four.

They moved on. Through space. Through stillness. And now the sky was as before—bare, empty, glazed, burning with sunlight—but the earth itself, for the first time, began to change. Each day now its darkness deepened; from tan to brown, from brown to brownish black; until at last it was wholly black—and they moved through a world of black sand, black rock, black twisted hills of basalt and obsidian.

Here at last, Claude thought, *was* the end of the world. The Omega World. The place of endings.

Through the long day, under the sun, alone, he thought of death. And of the dead. He thought of Jensen now far behind them. Lutz, Egal, Nagunda—and then of another, nameless, too, who had never been . . . They had each made their journey—some long, some short—and they had come to its end, to their world's end, Omega . . . as he at last, now, had come too: to the place of endings, the place of death.

He looked up. And he saw death. Death black and frozen across the miles of the waste . . . But it was not all he saw. He saw the caravan too. The caravan still plodding, still moving—through the place of death, the place of endings—still going forward, still a thing that lived. Through the end of the world—*going forward*. . . .

And above it the sun, too, went forward; it lived and shone; it moved past them, beyond them, to the west, and then it sank in the west. It sank beyond the earth, the black wastes, the place of endings; and behind it the sky still lived, still shone in the silent evening, first in a fiery blaze of red and orange, then in a vast gleaming of deep violet-blue.

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

The fifth week passed. And the sixth. They were out of the black lands; the earth was brown again. But it was still waste-land, still bare and parched and empty. Apart from Jensen's death, the caravan had had good fortune. No other men had died, or been seriously sick. They had lost only six camels out of a hundred.

It was at this stage that they became aware that they were not alone in the waste. A caravan was heading toward them, heading eastward, and they stared at it as if at an apparition from the world of spirits.

It was a small caravan—not a quarter the size of their own—and at its head was a wizened whiskered Swiss called Koerner . . . Where was he coming from—Ankober?—Fitzsimmons asked, eyeing him with uneasy suspicion. And what had he brought in with him? Guns? . . . No, not guns, the Swiss said. He had brought the usual trade goods: and he had been, not to Ankober, but farther north—to the lands of King John of Tigré . . . Fitzsimmons showed obvious relief, but he was still not wholly satisfied. "If it's to Tigré ye've been," he said, "why're ye comin' back this way? Why not the shorter way up north, to Massawa?"

"Because," said Koerner, "they say a military expedition is on the way from Massawa. The Italians and Menelik have been having trouble, and they are going after him. Menelik, they say, will go out to fight them; and I have enough trouble, thank you, without finding myself in the middle of a battle."

(())

That night, Fitzsimmons sat hunched and brooding in front of his own tent, staring silently out at the wasteland.

Suddenly he jumped to his feet and came over to Claude. "It's no good!" he said vehemently. "It no bloody good! They can fight all they want, fer all I care. They can chop 'emselves up into bloody mincemeat . . . But not before we get there, that's the thing. *By God, not before we get there!*"

The Irishman leaned forward. His voice was tense and rasp-

THE DAY ON FIRE

ing. "Don't ye see what happens if they do?" he said. "The Eyeties come. Menelik goes out and fights 'em. And whoever wins we're sunk. The Eyeties win, and they kill him—or chase him halfway across Africa. Or *he* wins, and what's the first thing he does? He grabs their guns. New guns—not old ones, like ours. And when we show up later he laughs at us."

Claude shrugged. "Perhaps," he said. "But those are chances we have to take. There's nothing we can do."

"The hell there ain't! We can go faster, that's what. Get to Ankober before he leaves."

Claude shook his head. "The caravan can't go any faster."

"The whole cravan, no. With all the guns, no. But I'll tell ye what we can do, and we're goin' to do it." Fitzsimmons pointed a bony finger. "You'll take over the caravan—the main part," he said, "and keep goin' just like always. Me, I'll go ahead. Startin' tomorrow. I'll take a few men, a few camels—that's all. We'll travel light. We'll get to Ankober in half, mebbe a third of the time if I'll take the rest of ye; and I'll see Menelik; I'll tell him the guns are comin'—two thousand of 'em—and he'll wait. Yes—yes, that's it!" he said. "Tomorrow I'm leavin' ye, hell bent fer Ankober."

Claude watched him for a moment. Then he said, "Are you sure you think it is worth the danger?"

"Danger?" Fitzsimmons wheeled back to him. "What danger? All this mallarkey about the fee-rocious Danakils . . . We been in their country fer weeks, and what's happened? Nothin'. Tomorrow I'm goin'. I'm runnin' this show, Froggy, and that's the way it's goin' to be."

And in the morning he started off. With him he took five men, seven camels, and only the guns that they themselves were carrying.

(())

The rest of the caravan plodded on. Through the miles. Through the days. And now the order of march was again changed, with Claude moving up to the front.

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

Out ahead, Claude set the same pace they had now used for hundreds of miles. Most of the time he rode, like the others, but now and then his legs grew cramped, his right knee began to ache, and then, dismounting, he would walk for a while. The trail was easy to follow; easier now than before, because of the tracks and droppings of the Swiss's caravan and Fitzsimmons'. He saw no sign of Danakils. Nor, yet, of the great escarpment that should soon be rising out of the west.

And then it *did* rise; blue-and-violet, high and gleaming . . . and he walked on, staring, out of the wasteland, toward the mountains of Abyssinia.

The caravan was unseen behind him. He was alone. And then, after a time, not alone; for Vayu rode up with a message and dismounted, and for a while they walked together.

In silence, walking, they looked at the mountains, and then Vayu said, "Sidi!" And his voice was different. With one hand he had grasped Claude's arm and with the other was pointing to the trail ahead. "Oh, sidi!" he said once more. And, looking, Claude saw what he saw, and they moved forward and stopped and looked down.

They looked at the six bodies: five brown and one white. There was nothing else to be seen—no camels, no tents, no guns, no clothing—but only the bodies, naked and bloody.

(())

They went on. The mountains grew nearer and clearer. They were a rampart filling the horizon ahead. And each day, too, the land around them changed, as it sloped away gently into the valley of the River Ahwash. On one day they came to patches of grass, on the next to scattered trees; and toward evening of the next, just as the sun was setting behind the purple mountains, they reached the Ahwash.

The mountains did not have foothills, building slowly up to the heights; indeed, they were not properly mountains at all, but a vast escarpment, a wall, a battlement—the buttress of the eastern end of the Abyssinian plateau.

THE DAY ON FIRE

The trail continued up the escarpment—the trail of centuries—to Abyssinia; but Claude knew that it would be difficult if not wholly impossible, for camels. And therefore now, as Jensen had originally planned, they set about the procedure of looking for mules. For more than a week the caravan moved up-and downstream, bartering and haggling in the villages along the river. And at last Claude was ready to go on.

Not so all the men, however. Of the nineteen remaining drivers, nine refused to go farther. They were camel-men, they said—not mule-men. They had come far enough, they knew nothing of mountains; they were Moslems and would not enter a country of infidels; and they would stay by the Ahwash until Claude returned, or join another caravan bound out for the coast.

On the eleventh morning they crossed the river and that night camped at the base of the escarpment. The next day they climbed, all day: first up bare shale and gravel, then through a belt of stunted forest, finally into a gray cold tumbled world of brush and rock.

The next morning four more drivers left them. There were now six, including the headman Rashi—plus themselves—plus eighty-seven mules. As before, Claude led the train, with Vayu at its middle, Rashi at the end, and the others spread out widely between. It was still colder now. The mist was thicker.

They did not climb long. Perhaps an hour—no more. As they climbed, the mist thinned. The slope lessened. It was gone. They were on the escarpment's summit. Ahead were huts and tents and walls, the walls of Ankober.

((11))

HE THOUGHT of another coming, another pilgrimage. Of a riverbank clearing, of naked savages, of dancing black files in the jungle night. But this had been far away, long ago. Now he stood in a high-beamed hall, gleaming with torches, on the

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

highest dome of the escarpment, and the hall was the court of Menelik who was one of the lords of Africa.

Vayu was not with him. Ranged on either side, along the walls, were tall cloaked warriors with spears and shields, and before him, on a dais, sat Menelik of Shoa. He was a man in his prime: tall, even though seated, and broad and powerful both in body and limb. Over a white robe he wore a black silk cloak with a scarlet lion embroidered on the chest. His face, like the rest of him, was broad and strong. It was framed below by a thick black beard. Of the whole of him, frame and face, there was only one thing small—and this was the size of his eyes; and now that Claude had inclined his head and said, "Your Majesty," the small eyes looked at him, shrewdly, steadily, and a long moment passed before Menelik spoke.

Then he said, in a deep rough-edged voice, "In this court, *ferangi*, it is customary to make a deeper bow."

Claude inclined his head a little farther. "I have brought you guns," he said.

"Yes, I know," said the king. "We are already unpacking and sorting them."

Menelik rose. And now his height was tremendous.

"Most Europeons, of course, think that we are niggers," he said. "That I, Menelik, am a nigger King. But we are not, you know. I am not. Our skins are dark—yes—because we have lived long in the sun of Africa, but our ancestors lived in the land of Christ in the days before Christ was born." He leaned forward a little, and at the same time seemed to draw himself up. "Do you know who I am, *ferangi*?" He said. "I am the Lion of Judah. My royal blood is older than that of all the kings of Europe together. My ancestors were kings in Israel, when yours were savages in the northern woods."

"I am aware of your lineage, Your Majesty," said Claude. "But if I may say so, you make one mistake about mine. My forebears did not live in the woods."

"France was full of woods in the time of Israel. You are a Frenchman, aren't you?"

"I am called a Frenchman today. But my ancestors were not

THE DAY ON FIRE

French—nor woodsmen. They lived on plains, in open country. Very much, I think, like the country of Abyssinia."

Menelik's broad face grew puzzled. He frowned. "And who were these?" he asked.

"They were called Huns, Your Majesty. But it is not important. And I do not wish to waste your important time. If it pleases Your Majesty, I suggest that we conclude our business."

"Business?"

"The matter of the guns. The guns that I brought you."

"We have already spoken of the guns. They will be of some use. But they would have been of more, had they not been full of sand and dust."

"I regret that. But I am willing to make a slight adjustment in the price, Your Majesty."

Menelik looked at him blankly. "Price?" he said. "Price?"

"Of one hundred thousand francs," said Claude. "Or the equivalent of course, in other currency."

"I am afraid I do not know what you are talking about. I expected the guns as a gift. A most generous gift, I may say; and I am most grateful—indeed touched." Now it was Menelik who smiled. "It seems to me most—fraternal, shall we say: a gift of guns from *ferangi* to a nigger King, to protect his kingdom—and kill other *ferangi*."

Claude's body was rigid, his jaw was tight. But he kept his voice low and controlled. "Your Majesty," he said, "you know quite well you wrote a letter, a document, agreeing to pay for these guns."

"I see . . . And you, of course, have this document? May I see it, please."

"I do not have it with me. It is with my baggage, from which I was separated when I arrived here."

"Ah, with your baggage. And it is from me, you say, and addressed to you."

"No, not to me. To my partners, Jensen and Fitzsimmons."

"And where are these partners, may I ask?"

"They are dead," said Claude.

"Hmm—that is unfortunate. Or perhaps, you had thought,

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

not unfortunate. Because of course you have no document showing that you are the surviving partner. You should have thought of that, my friend, before you killed your friends in the desert."

"Killed them—?"

The king's face became relaxed, almost pleasant. "Why not?" he asked. "It would be a fine stroke of business."

Claude tried to speak, but he waved him into silence. "Do not ruffle your feathers. Perhaps you did—perhaps you did not. Frankly, it is no concern of mine. . . . But it also is no concern of mine when you babble about payments. . . . So all is even, eh, my friend? Our business is concluded. And I shall not keep you any longer."

He half turned away, but Claude did not move. And Menelik looked at him. "I had thought you were anxious to leave Ankober," he said.

"I shall leave when—"

"Ah, I see your caravan has been dispersed and must be reassembled. . . . Well, we are not the simpletons you took us for, perhaps, but we are not inhospitable either. I shall have a place assigned to you and your young assistant and you may stay there while you make your arrangements."

"If you will please listen, Your Majesty—" Claude said quietly.

But the audience was over. Menelik nodded to the guards, and they led him out.

(())

The "place" was merely a *tukul*, a circular spike-topped hut of mud and thatch. But, a servant, bringing food, came each day. They were allowed to come and go as they pleased, and though Claude knew they were carefully watched, they were not interfered with.

The town was far smaller and more primitive than Harar. And, at the same time, beautiful and hideous: beautiful in its majestic site on the great rim of the escarpment, in its cedared

THE DAY ON FIRE

hills and thrusting headlands; hideous in its filth and squalor, in its close-packed fetid huts, in its streets, deep in garbage.

The people were dark-skinned, ranging from coffee brown to black, as black as Negroes, mostly with full lips and thick bushy hair. But as Menelik had said, and Claude knew, they were not Negroes. Their heads were long and fine-boned, their noses aquiline; watching them, one did not think of tropical Africa but of figures from Biblical stories, from the pages of the Old Testament. It was a nation of warriors and priests. They were everywhere.

Claude waited for a week after his audience with Menelik to see if the king would again summon him. But no summons had come; and thereafter, each day, with Vayu, he climbed the hill to the palace.

Sometimes the guards stopped them; sometimes they were allowed to pass. But even when past they did not get to the king. And then, suddenly, a stamp thumped. A door opened. An attendant led them down a hall and through a second door into the great beamed hall, and they were standing alone before Menelik.

"Yes? State your business," said the king.

"I am sure," Claude said, "That Your Majesty remembers—"

"Remembers? Remembers what?" Menelik's small eyes examined him. . . . "Oh, it is you," he said. "Morel—the Frenchman. I beg your pardon—the Hun. I had thought you had left here long ago."

"No, Your Majesty, I have not left."

"So, you like it here, eh? Good. Excellent. If enough *ferangi* come, and like it, we shall have a fine tourist business. Though most, I trust, will be more solvent than you."

"That is what I wish to speak—"

But Menelik was not listening. He was looking at Vayu. "This, I suppose, is the young Christian," he said. "Your accomplice."

"My partner," said Claude. "If it please Your Majesty we have been appreciative of your hospitality. And I am aware

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

of the truth of what you say about my solvency. But may I point out that the reason is that I have not been paid."

"Paid?" said Menelik. "Paid for what?"

"For the guns that I brought you."

"Oh—we are back to that. You, my friend the Frenchman—my friend the Hun—can now get out," he suddenly roared. "Out of here. Out of Ankober. And do not bother me any more!"

Claude stood unmoving. "I cannot go, Your Majesty," he said. "The caravan has been dispersed. I have no money. I shall go only if I am forced to."

"Forced? You will not go of your own accord? You prefer to stay here?"

"Yes."

"And do what? Go on forever living off my charity?"

"No."

"What then? Go into business, eh? To cheat my people. Take over their land. Bring your fine white civilization to Darkest Africa."

Claude tried to speak, but the king overrode him. "What else could you do, eh?" he demanded. "What else do you know, you trader and peddler, except cheating and conniving?"

He paused, waited—and then was answered. But it was not by Claude. It was by Vayu.

"We know how to teach," Vayu said.

The king stared at him. "Teach?" he repeated. "Teach *what*, for the love of God?"

"Many things, Your Majesty," said Vayu. "How to read and write, and languages and figures. The sidi and I have both taught, when we lived in Harar. And I have seen there are no schools at all in Ankober."

(())

And so they taught. For a month—and then two—and then three. Menelik did not summon them again. He had ridden out of Ankober at the head of his army.

THE DAY ON FIRE

All the pupils were of the dominant families of Ankober: the sons of *rases*, commanders, landowners, officials. And Claude soon learned that among the priests, from whose monasteries they had to draw their small supplies of books, there was an abiding hostility. But the king's warrant had been issued. And the hostility remained passive; the books were provided; the pupils appeared.

(())

Then another month passed. And Claude stood again before the Lion of Judah.

"I have been busy," the king told him. "Very busy. There is no end, my friend, to a king's labor for his people. And you?" he said. "How is it with my friend the Hun, the wealthy gunrunner? . . . I beg your pardon, I mean the schoolteacher."

"It is well enough, Your Majesty."

"I gather that the priests are not altogether happy. The chief priest, Tai Haimanot, has spoken to me, and his enthusiasm is, let us say, restrained. . . . But I have seen some of the boys as well. And I was impressed. I asked them to write their names, and they wrote them. I asked how much is four and three, and they said seven. I asked where is Rome, and they said Italy . . . Yes, I was pleased. And what the others say I do not care. 'Do you want to live forever in the Dark Ages?' I ask them. 'Do you want the *ferangi* to be right: that we are only savages, barbarians?' . . . Anyhow, you will go on with it. They will learn if it kills them . . . And in Entoto I shall see that you have better facilities."

"Entoto, Your Majesty?"

"I am moving my capital—have you not heard? Within a month now. This Ankober, I have outgrown it. It is a place for a bandit chief, not a king. Entoto is four days' journey to the west: in better country: richer, more civilized. And also it is more central—better located for administration; and also for my coming expedition against the Gallas and Shankallas."

The king paused briefly, allowing himself to enjoy the vision.

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

"Yes, it will be much better there," he said. "For me and my people . . . And for you . . . Yes, there I shall see that you have all you need. Not just a room, but a proper school. It will be called the Royal Academy. And you, as head, will have a title too. You will be Chancellor of Pedagogy. Yes, Chancellor of Pedagogy," he said, "—that is very good. As Chancellor of Pedagogy you will be paid—hmm—four hundred thalers a year." His small eyes studied Claude for a moment, and his broad pock-marked face was grinning. "At the present rate of exchange," he said, "—and if my calculations are right—you will have to serve in the post only fifty years to make your one hundred thousand francs."

(())

The caravan was enormous, stretching from horizon to horizon across the plains. It was said that, besides the court and the army, more than half the population of Ankober moved to Entoto, and that so long was the procession that its van was two of the four days' journey ahead of the rear.

The vast tide flowed on across the Abyssinian plateau, and on the third evening they saw, to the southwest, a mountain higher than all the others, its peak purple in the distance.

The mountain remained visible all the next day. But from noon on it was not at the mountain that they looked; it was at a gentle hill, broad and green, that rose directly ahead into the clear highland air. It was the hill of Entoto. On its flat summit could be seen the outlines of a great building, the royal palace-to-be, and around it and spilling down the hillside were the other buildings and churches and huts of the new capital of Shoa.

(())

They established their home. They established their school. The number of pupils increased. And they worked together closely, happily, as they had always been one with the other. But when night came, now, it was not as it always had been.

THE DAY ON FIRE

For as soon as their evening meal was over, or sometimes even before the meal, Vayu would leave the hut and walk down the street and usually not return until after Claude was asleep.

Now and then Claude too went out: for a walk, or to a shop for a mug of *tej* or *tala*. But more often he stayed in the hut, still working by lamplight; correcting his pupils' sums and spelling, preparing the next day's program, carefully reading the Amharic texts.

"I am a *fonctionnaire*," he thought. "*Un assis*. . . . Perhaps a hard-working one. But still *un assis*." He smiled at the thought.

(())

Again the cannons boomed, the trumpets blared, the drums rolled. For the better part of a day, from the crest of Entoto, a long column could be seen cutting across the southern valley. Then it vanished beyond the flanks of the volcano, Zoquala.

In the capital the king had left behind him, everything continued as before. In the school, the bright students remained bright, and the stupid ones stupid. In the hut, Claude sat alone at night, when he returned from a walk, and sometimes awoke when Vayu came in, much later.

The first day in a month indistinguishable from any other was the day of Vayu's wedding.

It came as no surprise to Claude. Almost from the beginning it had been obvious that what Vayu felt was no mere carnal attraction; for as his nightly absences continued, and occasionally he spoke of them and of the girl Biri, it had been with the eager voice, the shining eyes, that by now, to Claude, were so long familiar. Then, presently, as one day they walked home from the school, Vayu had swallowed and stammered and at last had come out with it. He wanted to marry Biri. And Claude had nodded and smiled.

"Then—then I have your permission?" asked Vayu happily.

"Permission? What permission do you need? You are twenty-two now—a grown man."

"But still, sidi, it is right that I ask. In your country, does

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

not a son, in such a matter, always ask permission of his father?"

Claude looked at him for a moment, and then away, along the hillside street. "For one thing," he said, "I am not old enough to be your father."

"Not old enough?" Vayu's voice held surprise. "How old are you, sidi? You have never told me."

"I am thirty-four. You thought I was older?"

"Yes, I thought—" Vayu broke off. "But anyhow," he said, "you are my father. My friend and father. And I have asked you, as I should—and oh, I am so happy that you say yes."

Claude had made but one comment—raised but one question—and that was about religion. "You are partly Moslem," he said, "and partly Christian, and mostly not anything at all. If she is a strict Copt, going always to church and seeing priests, there will be problems."

But Vayu had reassured him. "No, no, sidi, Biri is not like that at all—truly—and when you know her you will see. She is not just beautiful; she is intelligent. Yes, her family, it is old-fashioned. But she is different. She is wonderful. . . . And besides, we will not see much of her family. We will not live with them, but here with you."

"With me?" Claude shook his head. "No, Vayu. No, it will not be that way. You and Biri must have a place of your own."

(())

Claude rarely thought of Nagunda now. Or of the child, their child, that had never been. Indeed, he rarely thought of anyone, or anything, beyond the circle of the high plateau, the hill and town of Entoto, and the new life that he had found there. Once or twice he had considered writing his mother, as he had used to, but had not done so. Now, sharing his small salary with both Vayu and Biri, he could not have afforded to send her money; nor could he imagine, either, what he would say. It was now three years since he had written. She must think him dead. And it was better to remain so.

THE DAY ON FIRE

It was the season of sunlight. Then the season of rain. Again, with the rain, the land turned from burnt yellow to green, and the flat top of Zoquala gleamed white among the scudding clouds. Through the days, at the school, Claude taught his classes and did such administrative work as was necessary, and in the evenings he was either home alone or at Vayu and Biri's.

It was during the season of rains that Biri had her baby. It was a girl: brown, round, and great-eyed. And they named her Claudette. "And what sort of Abyssinian name is that?" said Claude to Vayu, protesting. "No, it is not Abyssinian," Vayu conceded. "But neither is it Harari. Biri and I could not agree on which of them it should be; so we decided on—how do you say?—a compromise."

Then, when Claudette was one month old, a messenger appeared in Entoto. But this one was not from Menelik. He was from the north. And the message he brought was that King John of Tigré had been killed in battle with the Dervishes of the Sudan.

And two weeks after that, Menelik himself, at the head of his army, returned to Entoto.

(())

Claude stood again before the king. He inclined his head. He said, "Your Majesty."

"Your Imperial Majesty," Menelik corrected him. "I am now not only King of Shoa. I am King of Tigré too. I am Negus Negusti, King of Kings, and Emperor of all Abyssinia."

"Your Imperial Majesty," said Claude.

The king nodded. "Yes, that is better." His small eyes looked down at Claude from the throne of ivory and gold. "I am afraid I must make this audience brief," he said. "As an emperor is greater than a king, so he is also busier; and I have many affairs of state and only a few days in which to deal with them. At week's end I leave again. For the north. For Tigré. On the campaigns I have been on—to Harar, to the south and west—I have seen more than ever what it takes to be a great modern

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

nation. . . . Shall I tell you why we were always victorious? Because we were braver than the others? No. Because God was with us? Perhaps, a little. But mostly it was because we were stronger, we had guns and cannons, the tools of power. . . . And schools, too, and education: they are tools, they are power. And we shall have them as well. We have your one school now, but soon more. Yes, more. In the new capital, when we move to it, there will be, to start, at least four, and—”

“The new capital?” said Claude.

“Yes. You have not heard of it? When I return from Tigré I shall begin the planning, and in a year or two we shall move.”

“But you have only just built Entoto.”

“So I have built it. And I shall leave it. It is better than Ankober, yes; for a small savage kingdom. But for an empire’s capital—no, it will not do. How many of Europe’s capitals are on hilltops, tell me that? Hilltops are for barbarians, for savage chiefs and their fortresses. But I am now an emperor, of what one day will be a great and modern nation, and I shall move down from the hilltop to the valley.”

“And where is this valley?” asked Claude. “Is it far?”

“No, it is not far.” Menelik rose and came down from his dais. Beckoning Claude to follow, he crossed the audience hall, went out through a door flanked by rigid guards, and now they were on the terrace above the southern slopes of Entoto.

“It is there,” he said, pointing to the valley below—the broad green gentle valley sweeping on toward the slopes of Mount Zoquala. “No farther than that. There I shall build my city, the capital of all Abyssinia, and it will be called Addis Ababa—the New Flower. And I will *make* it a flower, a jewel, a place of beauty in the wastes of Africa, and at the same time a city as modern as those of Europe.”

They turned back to the palace. “Yes, of *Europe*,” he said. “Do you know what I am going to do? I am going to send to Europe, to Switzerland, for an engineer and an architect—the best available—and they will come and help me build my city.

THE DAY ON FIRE

They will lay out avenues and squares and parks and markets. They will build me a palace like your palace at Versailles, and a church like St. Peter's, and great buildings for my government. . . .

"And do you know what else, my friend, my Chancellor of Pedagogy? What else—for you? . . . For you and the Royal Academy they will build, not one school, but four—one north, one south, one east, one west—so that my capital will be ringed by schools and by the light of learning."

The emperor smiled. His face shone with the pride of his vision. Then as they re-entered the great hall and crossed it, and as they walked he glanced sidewise at Claude and said, "Your limp is worse since I last saw you."

"Yes, a little," Claude conceded. "This is the rainy season, and it must be the dampness."

(())

Menelik marched off to the north.

The coming move down to the valley and the four schools they would have there had fired Claude and Vayu with excitement, and the discussion of plans went on late into the nights. Four schools would of course mean many more students—more books would be needed, and more teachers as well, and neither were to be found in Abyssinia. "If Menelik can import engineers and architects—" said Claude.

"Not to mention guns," said Vayu.

"Yes, not to mention guns . . . then he can import some books and teachers too."

And it was agreed that Claude would speak of this to the emperor when he returned from the north.

The rains returned.

Claude had colic.

Claude's knee grew stiffer.

He walked more—even in the heaviest rains—before school, and after, and often, too, at night.

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

Menelik returned from the north—from Tigré—and a few weeks later Claude started to assemble his caravan. It was not difficult, for he had a warrant from Menelik: for men and mules, for food and guns. The men and mules would go only as far as the Ahwash, and from there on he would have, instead, the desert Arabs and Somalis with their camels. It would be not nearly so large a caravan as that with which he had come, for it would have no heavy cargo to carry; but all the same large enough, at least from the Ahwash on, to be safe from attack by the Danakils.

"Across the desert," Claude said to Vayu, "I plan on twenty camels and fifteen men. With myself, that is sixteen and should be enough."

"And with seventeen," said Vayu, "it is even better."

"Seventeen?"

"With me, Sidi Claude. You have forgotten me."

"You? You are not coming."

"Yes. Yes, I am. To the coast with you—to Tajoura. And then I will come back with another caravan."

Claude shook his head. "No, it is no good. Impossible. There is the school—"

"I have thought all about the school, and it is all right, it works. There is the long vacation coming."

"And also there is Biri," Claude said. "And the baby. You cannot desert them like that."

"Who is deserting? I am going on a trip, that is all—like any man of affairs."

Claude again said no. And again, and again. But still, through each day that remained, Vayu persisted.

"But why?" Claude demanded. "Why must you come? What sense does it make?"

And at last Vayu answered, quietly, "Very well, Sidi Claude, I will tell you why. It is your knee."

"My knee? My knee is all right. It is only the rains, the dampness."

"I hope it is only that, sidi; but still I am coming. I will not

THE DAY ON FIRE

let you be alone in the desert with strangers. And if you do not let me come with you, then I will get a mule and camel of my own and follow you . . . ”

(())

So, on the day of departure, it was Claude and Vayu together who rode up to the palace to pay their respects to Menelik.

And the emperor looked at them and scowled and said, “So the school system of Abyssinia collapses. And my teachers vanish.”

“No, it will not collapse,” Claude told him. “And we are not vanishing; we shall be back. Vayu in three months, or less, and I in no more than six.”

Menelik grunted. “Hmm—You are ready to leave?”

“Yes, Your Imperial Majesty.”

“You have all you need? My treasurer has issued you the funds for travel and the purchase of books?”

“Yes.”

“Then,” said Menelik, “there is nothing further. You may go.” Turning, he reached down to the side of his throne. “And I hope,” he added, “that this does not add too much to the burden of your caravan.”

In his hand he held a sack, made of leopard skin, and for a moment he held it, then let it fall on the dais before him. The sack was heavy. The dais trembled. “In Addis Ababa,” said Menelik, “I shall have a dais made of marble.”

Claude looked at the sack.

“The young one is strong,” the emperor said, nodding at Vayu. “He can carry it out to your mules.”

Claude looked up from the sack. He looked at Menelik.

“Another thing we will have here too, when we are more civilized,” said Menelik, “is paper money. Meanwhile we must use what we have—silver thalers, gold, gems, and such. Rather a nuisance. But a nuisance that you will find redeemable, I think, for roughly two hundred thousand French francs.”

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

He consulted a slip of paper. "One hundred thousand francs," he said, "is a fifty-year advance on salary, so I will no longer have to be bothered with monthly payments. Ninety-five thousand is in settlement of an old bill for two thousand guns, which seems to have been overlooked by my accountants. The remaining five thousand is an imperial gift to the Chancellor of Pedagogy."

The Lion of Judah put the paper aside, and his broad pock-marked face spread into a white-toothed grin. "No, do not thank me, my professorial Hun," he said. "Thank the late King John of Tigré, for whose estate I am now the humble administrator."

((12))

BEHIND THEM now, the vast escarpment of Abyssinia rose skyward, its crest lost in cloud and rain. Ahead, in bright sunlight, was the desert. *Ayeee—ayaaa—*

Dust rose. The camels swayed. There was only the sun and the waste.

Claude would go, and he would return to Abyssinia. In part, perhaps, it was because of what he now owed Menelik; but only in small part; he would have returned anyhow, if he had not been paid a franc. For the true reason was deeper, and inward, and was that there, in the high heart of Africa, he had, for the first time in his life, been content and at peace. Once before, at certain periods in Harar, he had perhaps come close to it. But only close, never all the way. For he had not been at heart a trader, a *commercant*; he had built his wall of ledgers and tried to hide within. . . . Whereas now, as a teacher he had been happy.

In the desert night he remembered words long since forgotten; the words of Heine he had spoken to himself in the days of the Commune and the Golden Flame: ". . . I am a soldier in the war for the liberation of man. . . ." And he thought now:

THE DAY ON FIRE

"As a teacher, perhaps, I can do more toward that liberation than emperors and generals, governments and armies."

(())

The days passed. And the nights. The mornings followed the nights.

They came to the black lands, to the end of the earth, but still the earth spread on before them, unending, cinder-black, beneath the flaming sun. The sun seemed not only in the sky but in the earth itself, as well. They were moving, not under, but *through* it; it was around them, within them. It was in Claude's knee—most of all in his knee—becoming each day hotter, larger, more painful, until the knee itself was like the sun, swollen and burning. Each day he set off from camp mounted, like the others. When the pain became too much he got down and walked. But, for the first time in his memory, the walking did not help.

In their tent at night Vayu looked at the knee. "I will bind it, sidi," he said. "With a binding it will be cooler; there will not be the friction." And with strips of cloth from their extra clothing he fashioned a bandage, and tied it carefully about Claude's leg.

Then he said, "When you are in France, sidi—or even, first, in Aden—you should see a doctor. It is now a long time that the knee has been a trouble."

Claude nodded and said, "Yes, I shall see a doctor."

"Is it now—what?—six years that it has been trouble; since you went south from Harar with the men of Abou Dakir. . . . That was when you first hurt it, was it not, sidi?"

"I hurt it then—yes. But it was not the first time. The first time was long ago. When I was a boy I jumped from a train and fell." Claude was silent a moment. Then he added, "And later it was hurt again. I was shot."

"Shot? You have never told me that, sidi. How were you shot? You were a soldier once? It was in a war?"

"Yes," said Claude. "Yes, it was in a war."

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

He tried walking with the bandage. He tried riding. And it was better, a little better—for one day, and a second—and then the same as before.

"We will stop, sidi," said Vayu, "and rest for a day."

"No," he said. "No."

But whether they stopped or not, he could not later remember.

Then he was riding again. But not the same as before. He was no longer upright, but lying in a sort of harness, strapped to the camel's back. His leg was braced and covered, and at intervals Vayu or one of the drivers appeared and poured water on the covering. But the water was as hot as the sunlight; it rose in steam from the cloth, leaving it, in a few minutes, as dry as before. . . . And, in his lying position, his face was turned up toward the sun. . . . The sun beat down, shattering, splintering, through his closed lids, into his eyes, into his brain, his blood, his bones; into the great burning swelling mass that was his crippled leg. And its flame was yellow, it was blue, then fiery red, then white—and now everything was white, a blinding glare of whiteness.

He lay. He rode. The camel swayed. The earth swayed—and the sun. Then he was plucking at the straps that held him. He pulled, strained, loosened them, slid down from the camel to the swaying earth. And he fell—but rose—and he walked again. He walked on the trail behind the camel—as he had walked so many miles, so many years. And Vayu was beside him, protesting, but he did not listen. He walked on. He would walk into Tajoura; not be carried in; and if strength would not take him, pride would. And it did. He walked in pride, as in the old days—as Attila, as Lucifer—defying the miles, defying the pain, defying defeat and death, defying God Himself. . . .

No. Not that last, he thought. Not him. Not God.

Out of the dead, out of the grave of the past, words rose again, and he spoke the words. "God is my strength, and I praise God. . . ."

THE DAY ON FIRE

He lay still and looked up, but it was not at the sun. It was not at the walls of a tent, but at a ceiling. He was in a room. In Tajoura.

He was on a dhow, on the deck of a dhow, propped on a sort of couch of cushions under an awning, and all around him was the sea. He saw the sea, heard it, felt it; but he could not smell it. What he smelled was something else, with sloping backs, yellow eyes, and the loathsome stench filled his nostrils.

"The hyenas," he said to Vayu. "The hyenas—drive them away."

"I have driven them, sidi," Vayu told him. "They are gone now."

And he sat looking down at the couch of cushions—at the thing that had once been a leg.

He was in a place that was both a room and a boat. But it was no longer a dhow; it was a great ship, he was in a cabin. As he lay in the cabin and looked at Vayu, an enormous clarity seemed to fill his mind.

Reaching beneath his pillow, he drew out his money belt. Or, rather, two belts, two halves of the belt, for he had cut it in two; and he handed one half to Vayu.

Vayu stared at it. "No," he murmured. "No, sidi—"

"Yes," said Claude, putting the other half back under the pillow. "This is mine. That is yours."

"No, sidi, not so much. It is a fortune. . . . And not now. When you come back—when we are again together—then maybe you will give me something and I will take it—"

"You will take this. It is yours," Claude said. "And we will not argue."

There was a silence. Then, above them, the ship's horn sounded—humming, echoing, in the little room.

"So, go now," said Claude.

For a moment Vayu stood motionless. Then he dropped the belt. He flung himself on his knees beside the berth. "No—no—" he cried. "Do not make me go. Take me with you, sidi! Please, please, Sidi Claude, take me with you!"

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

Claude shook his head gently. "No, I cannot. And you cannot go. You must get back to Biri and Claudette."

"They can get along—till we come back together . . . Please! please!" Vayu embraced him—held him. He was no longer a young man, but a boy again; a boy pleading and sobbing. "I will not leave you, sidi. I will go with you anywhere—stay with you always. Oh please, Sidi Claude, take me—take me—"

Claude still shook his head. "No," he said. "Go!" He pointed to the floor. "And take your half of the belt, or I will throw it after you."

He tried to smile. Perhaps he did smile. And Vayu took the belt and slowly rose and stood before him.

"And now, *salaam, mon vieux*," said Claude. "*Salaam aleikum.*"

Again the ship's horn hooted. In the corridor there was the sound of a gong and a steward's voice.

"*Salaam,*" said Vayu, his voice a whisper. "*Salaam, my sidi—*"

Then he turned. He ran. He was gone.

The brief clearness was gone. Where there had been clearness, there was now dimness. In Claude's eyes was a blurring, a tingling, a sensation strange and uncontrollable, that he had never known before in all the years of his life.

Turning to the wall, he covered his face with his hands, and wept.

((13))

"VAYU," he said. "Vayu—"

And a voice answered.

But it was not Vayu's voice. It was a woman's. It spoke in French.

Then he opened his eyes. And everything was white. The ceiling was white, and the walls, and the bed. The figure beside

THE DAY ON FIRE

him, beside the bed, was white: the figure of a nun. And he remembered where he was. He was in Marseilles. In a hospital.

He remembered other things.

But not all things.

He did not remember the sea. For he had not seen the sea. Nor fellow passengers, for he had not seen them either. He remembered a steward with a red face and a doctor with a sal-low face; and the doctor's needles. Later, a blurred, confusing hour on a stretcher, with voices and faces around him. And then a bed. This bed. He remembered nuns—many nuns—and gentle hands, gentle faces.

He remembered questions.

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-six."

"Your residence?"

"Entoto, Abyssinia."

"No, in France, monsieur. Your next of kin?"

"Madame Natalie Morel."

"Relationship: wife?"

"No, mother. Cambon. Département des Ardennes."

He remembered the nuns—and the doctor. Not the one in Aden, nor the one on the ship, but another, a third one. He re-membered pain. And needles. And then he slept—the sleep of needles. At intervals he awoke, and someone was speaking or holding a spoon to his mouth; but he remained awake only briefly before slipping back into darkness. The doctor came and went, and the nuns . . . until one day a nurse stood at the door and said, "This way, please, Sister Annamarie," and a strange nun entered the room. Those of the hospital wore white, but this one was in dark brown, with only a white coif framing her face, and she came quickly in and knelt by his bedside.

"Do not waste your time, or God's, praying for me, Sister," he told her gently.

And then she raised her head, and he saw her face. And she was not very young—many of the hospital nuns were younger

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

—but her face was smooth and delicate, almost childlike; her eyes were as blue and clear as the eyes of a child; and when he saw the eyes he knew her, and he said, "But the sister who brought you called you Annamarie."

"That is my name in Christ," said his own sister. "But to you I am always Yvette." And rising, she kissed him on the cheek and forehead, while the clear eyes blurred with moisture; and then she sat beside him holding his hand.

"Mother could not come," she said. "But I was able to get leave. The Mother Superior was very kind. And I have come, Claude dear, to take you home."

(())

She came each day thereafter—twice a day, each time for an hour. "And when I am not here," she told him, smiling, "I am praying for you. To Our Lord and Our Lady and the Saints, and they will hear my prayer, and soon you will be strong enough to travel."

The doctors came too. They examined him and consulted. There were more needles. He slept. He woke. His body, beneath the pain, beneath the sheet, felt bloated and enormous, and he tried to push back the sheet to look down at it. But something was wrong: he could not move the sheet. He could not move his arm. He tried the other arm, and that too would not move; nor would his left leg when he tried to bend it.

"Yes, the infection has spread a bit," the doctor told him, "and there is slight paralysis." Then he added cheerfully: "But it is nothing to worry about, *mon brave*. Soon we will have you back as fit as ever."

Then he slept again, and dreamed, and in his dream he was no longer motionless in a bed, but moving across seas, across deserts, across mountains, toward a white city; and the sky above the city was not fire-and-mudstained, but a luminous violet-blue.

When he awoke he said to Yvette, "I was talking, wasn't I?" "Yes, dear," she said. "You were on one of your trips, I think."

THE DAY ON FIRE

"I have been on so many trips. So many." He was silent for a bit. "There are nuns in Africa," he said, "—though I didn't see any. But I knew a priest, a Capuchin. And he was a good priest. A good man."

"I am glad to hear you say that, dear," said Yvette.

The next time he awoke, she was kneeling, head bowed, by his bedside.

"No, none of that," he told her. "Please. None of that."

She looked up at him earnestly with her clear blue eyes. "To pray is good, brother," she said. "For all of us. It would do you good, truly, if you tried yourself."

"No," he said. "No." And he shook his head.

That was the only part of him he could move: his head.

Then:

"Where's Mother?" he asked.

"You will be back wth your mother soon," said the doctor. "We are all very pleased with your progress."

"What you should be pleased with," said Claude, "is your lying. Now go away, please. For the love of God, go away."

And now the doctor was gone. There was only Yvette. And raising his head a little, he said to her in a low voice, but clearly, "Is my valise still there in the corner?"

"Yes, dear," said Yvette, "it is still there."

"At the bottom, in the blue trousers, you will find my wallet, and in the wallet about ten thousand francs. It is not mine, it is expense money, and what I do not use should be returned. When you have paid the hospital and all other bills, send what is left to . . . Do you have something to write with?"

"Yes, dear," said Yvette.

". . . to His Imperial Majesty, Menelik, Negus Negusti, Entoto, Abyssinia." He spelled out the strange words for her; then added, "You had better also write via *Aden-Tajoura*; the post office can be very stupid. And in a note say it is from me and I am sorry."

He was silent for a while.

Then he said: "I have already taken care of Vayu and his family. . . . And to Nagunda I can send nothing."

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

Now Yvette receded. The doctor, the nurses, the room receded. He lay alone: one soul and one body.

I shall be free to possess the truth, he had said, *in one soul and one body.*

And he had been free: yes: no man had ever been freer. . . . But what truth he had possessed he did not know. . . . Truth, like the world, like God, had many faces, and the faces rose and flickered and dissolved, like the images in a dream.

He was watching faces now—many faces—as they passed before him. There was the face of Egal, hanging bloody in darkness; the face of Nagunda and another face, lost in darkness—a face unborn, that had never been. There were the faces of Father Lutz and Vayu, and these were close above him; and Vayu was weeping. Lutz receded now, he was far away, and Claude called after him, “Father! Father!” . . . And the father turned; but it was not Lutz.

It was another priest who stood beside him, beside the bed in the hospital room. And he said, “You wished to see me, my son?”

“No,” said Claude. “No, I do not wish to see you.”

“Sister Annamarie said you had called.”

“Sister Annamarie was wrong.”

He closed his eyes again. It was easier to keep them closed. The priest was farther away now, but he was still speaking. Claude could hear his voice. He could hear words. He heard the word *faith*. He heard *sin* and *repentance* and *grace* and *salvation*. He heard *prayer*. He heard *soul*. He heard *redemption*. And he thought, “Yes, once I knew a prayer, a prayer of redemption, the soul’s redemption: *My eternal soul . . . redeem your promise . . . in spite of the night alone . . . and the day on fire. . . .*”

Then the priest’s voice was gone. There was another voice: Yvette’s.

And she was pleading. “Please, please dear, please Claude. Come back to us. To those who love you. To the Church. To God. . . . Speak to the Father. Confess to him. Give him your

THE DAY ON FIRE

heart, your soul, and he will absolve you, he will bless you. Give your heart and soul to God—oh please, my dearest—and He will embrace and hold you in His love forever. . . .”

Then her voice, too, was gone. The words were gone.

“Words—words—” he thought. Was that all that Life and Love and God were made of: words?

No, not for him! For him, to hell with words. *Merde* to words. I have buried the dead words.

. . . But, now, suddenly the dead rose. Out of the flesh, from the putrescence of death, there rose that which was not death; there came word and image, dream and vision, rising, soaring, shining, like golden birds; and again he saw the birds, he saw the jungles, the seas, the rainbows, the star-archipelagoes, the silver star burning in the southern sky; he saw the *being of beauty*, clothed in words, robed in vision, but beyond cloth and robe was the core, the essence, the truth itself; and this he saw too, again—as he had once seen it—only now clearer than before, brighter than before, bright in new-born life, in birth, in resurrection. . . .

And he heard a voice, a voice intoning: *I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.*

And then Yvette was there, Yvette kneeling beside him. And she said: “Oh Claude, it is so beautiful—”

“What is beautiful?” he said.

“What you have been saying. In your sleep, your dreams. The pictures—the colors: all you have seen. And the words you use to tell it.”

She was holding his hand. He could not see it. He could not feel it. But still he knew that his hand was in hers.

“Mother told me that you had once been a poet,” she said. “It had been long ago, she told me, but she was wrong. You are still a poet. What you dream, what you say, are full of wonder and beauty.”

She was silent a while. Faintly he felt her hand.

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

Then she said, "There is another wonder, dear. Another beauty. The most wonderful and beautiful of all. There is Our Lord and Christ His Son. . . ."

He lay motionless, with eyes closed.

"Oh please, Claude, please!" she said again. "Turn to Them. Come to Them. It will bring you such joy, such peace. It will fill your soul with light. . . . The Father is coming again soon. When he comes . . . please . . . he wants so much to help you. God Himself wants to. If only—only—"

The words faded. Where words had been there was now another sound: the soft sound of sobbing. And now at last Claude moved. He opened his eyes and turned his head and saw the face of his sister close beside him. He saw the child's face, the blue child's eyes, the eyes welling with tears; and he wanted to raise his hand, the hand held in hers, to touch her, to comfort her. But the hand would not move.

It was his lips that moved. "It would make you happy?" he said.

And she could not answer. She could only look at him. And then, her eyes streaming, she bowed her head and pressed her lips against his hand.

(())

Now the priest was there again. He seemed always to be there. He was talking. . . . talking. . . . and then Claude was talking. He heard the dim croak of his own voice. He was confessing. But what he confessed he did not know.

Then it was the priest talking again. He held a cross. He was giving absolution. There were candles burning. There were white nuns around him, murmuring *Ave Marias*. Murmuring, "Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. . . ." Then the white ones were gone, and there was only the brown one. Only Yvette. And now she was weeping again, but this time differently, for her face, close to his, was transfigured with happiness.

He smiled at her. He said, "Hello, princess."

THE DAY ON FIRE

In his life he had not made many people happy. Vayu, perhaps. Now Yvette. That was all.

(())

He had matters of his own to attend to. He raised his head and said clearly:

"Do you have something to write with?"

"Yes, dear," said Yvette.

"Then take a letter please. . . . *To the Messageries Maritimes, Port of Marseilles. . . . Gentlemen: Enclosed find my draft covering first-class passage. . . no, that's a waste; make it second. . . for your next scheduled sailing to Port Said, Suez, and the Red Sea Ports. I will appreciate your informing me of the embarkation time. Very truly yours, et cetera. . . . Do you have it?*"

"Yes, dear," said Yvette, "I have it."

Then he slept.

And he awoke. And it was morning.

Always my tired eyes awake, he thought. Always. . . .

But now they were not tired. They were clear and strong. His body was strong. And he rose from bed. He walked as he had used to walk, without lameness, without tiredness, strongly, steadily. He walked out of the town, and along the river into the forest. He came out of the forest into the fields, into the towns and cities; and beyond the cities were mountains, beyond the mountains was desert, and he walked on through the desert wastes. In the wastes, he knew, were the ones who waited: the ones with sloping backs, with great jaws, with yellow eyes. But they came only in the darkness, and it was not dark now. The sun poured its light on him, bright but not burning. The day shone in its brightness, but was not on fire.

He saw the end of the wastes. He saw a glint, a gleam. And it was water. It was a tiny patch of water—a pool, a puddle—and in the puddle was a boat, a child's boat, a toy: a thing of paper and thread and the twigs of bushes, as small and frail

JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

as a May butterfly. . . . Or so it seemed at first. . . . But as he approached it, it grew. The puddle grew. It spread out before him, to each side of him, becoming a pond, a lake, a bay, a sea; it became a great harbor, with the sea beyond; and in the harbor, at dock, was the boat—the ship—and it too was larger now; it was tall, immense, with masts soaring skyward and sails set full. But there was no wind. It did not move. It was waiting. It waited, ready and tall and still; not swaying, not heel-ing—not a drunken boat but calm, majestic—and its sails shone like gold, in sunlit radiance, between the sea and sky.

He was on the shore. On the dock. Then he boarded the ship. He stood on the deck, at the wheel, and looked out. He looked at the sky, and the sky was clear; it was cloudless, stain-less; deep violet-blue, omega-blue.

The wind rose. The ship put out to sea.

It All Started With Marx

RICHARD ARMOUR

With pictures by CAMPBELL GRANT



AN ABRIDGEMENT

The Author

Although RICHARD ARMOUR is best known to the public as a humorist, his remarkably varied career has a serious side as well. A Ph.D. from Harvard, Dr. Armour is Professor of English at Scripps College and Claremont Graduate School in California. In all he has eighteen books to his credit, including a number of scholarly works. CAMPBELL GRANT who has illustrated Mr. Armour's previous satires of history and literature is a former Disney artist. He lives on a ranch near Santa Barbara, California with his wife and children.

IT ALL STARTED WITH MARX
Richard Armour
With pictures by Campbell Grant
Published by
McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc.
Copyright © 1958 by Richard Armour

FOREWORD

ONCE UPON A TIME there was no such thing as Communism. People ignorantly toiled and saved, hoping to Get Ahead like the heroes in Horatio Alger's books, which they forgot were fiction. Frequently, blinded by sentimentality, they left money to their Loved Ones. When this was done on a large scale, it led to the accumulation of huge fortunes, like those of Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Ford, which some harebrained member of the younger generation was sure to squander on public libraries and housing projects.

Lacking vision, many were unable to see anything shameful about accepting the rewards of industry and thrift. Still worse, there were those who spelled the word State without a capital. A particularly shocking lapse on the part of capitalists. There were also those who believed in some sort of Deity, or at least had an uneasy feeling that there was something bigger than the Head Man. They did not know, until it was pointed out by Marx, that religion is the opium of the people and should be sold only on prescription.

Conditions were dreadful, with so much freedom and family life and churchgoing and money in the bank. Something had to be done, and quickly, or the Decline of the West would be followed by the Debacle of the East, and the North and South would come tumbling after.

This book, dedicated to the proposition that all men are created, tells how a new philosophy arose to fill the void and how it swept men's minds like wildfire, burning them to a crisp. It illustrates again and again the tenacity with which a handful of selfless (and propertyless) men clung to their ideals of

RICHARD ARMOUR

liberty, equality, and fratricide. It reaches a crescendo in the Era of Stalin, when it shows how a Georgian cobbler's son with a bulletproof vest could rise to the top and occupy the Master Bedroom in the Kremlin.

The author has gone to a vast number of original and unoriginal sources and has interviewed countless people who have never been to Russia. The scholarship of this book is not only beyond question but beyond belief. The reader who has been seeking a trustworthy account of Communism need go no farther.

R.A.



KARL MARX

MOST PEOPLE identify the origin of Communism with Russia, unaware that it was invented by a German while he was in France. This German, whose name was Karl Marx, went to Paris because it was a place where a man could think freely, if not clearly. Subsequently this Leftist left the Left Bank, transferring his thinking to England. At that time England was exporting such quantities of woolen goods, walking shoes, and poems by Tennyson that it had to import social philosophers to maintain the balance of trade. How Communism got to Russia, we shall see later. It was not by surface travel but by underground.

BIRTH AND BOYHOOD

Karl Marx was born in the Rhineland city of Trier early on the morning of May 5, 1818.¹ It was an ungodly hour, which

¹ Whether it was two o'clock, as stated by E. H. Carr, or one-thirty, as maintained by B. Nicolaievsky and O. Maench-Helfen, is a controversy from which we prefer to remain aloof.

RICHARD ARMOUR

may explain Marx's later attitude toward religion. He awoke everyone with his cries, and few realized that even then he was complaining about the injustice of it all.

Karl's father was a lawyer, and he hoped his son would follow in his footsteps, which led from the house to the office to the *Bierstube*. Like a good son, Karl promised to study law, but there was a gleam in his eye which handicapped him when it came to reading fine print. He was a pale, studious lad with a philosophical bent, long hours at a desk having ruined his posture.

UNIVERSITY CAREER

At the University of Bonn, which Karl attended in order to revolutionize the curriculum, an event of no little importance occurred. He engaged in a duel and, momentarily preoccupied with a philosophical problem, lowered his guard. He received a thrust over the left (*sic*) eye, which marked him for life.

After a year at Bonn, young Marx went to Berlin University, ostensibly to pursue the law, which was running scared. But he seems to have taken a wrong turn at one of the corridors, and his notebooks were full of Aristotle, Spinoza, Leibnitz, and Bacon, the latter in long strips used as bookmarks.

INFLUENCE OF HEGEL

It was at this time that he became a Hegelian, firmly asserting that nothing is static, even when his hair stood on end and you could plainly see sparks. Everything, he insisted, was flowing. To prove this he would go around turning on faucets. It was from Hegel that he got the idea of "dialectic," which has been lucidly defined as "the triadic movement of thought from thesis to antithesis to synthesis." However, the idea of "dialectical materialism" is Marx's very own. Those who have borrowed it have always been glad to give it back.

Because of a disagreement with one of his professors, who refused to sit in the back row while Marx lectured to the class, Karl withdrew rather hastily from Berlin University. A week

IT ALL STARTED WITH MARX

later he took his doctorate at the University of Jena. He was now entitled to be called Dr. Marx, though not encouraged to perform appendectomies.

JOURNALISM AND JENNY

After winning his degree, Marx went home long enough to have a violent quarrel with his mother over finances. She made the mistake of saying that he was a big boy now and should have his allowance reduced. Not as yet having coined the phrase, "to each according to his need," Marx stormed off to Bonn. In this very religious city, he had the brilliant idea of founding a *Journal of Atheism*, which, because of lack of competition, was certain of success. However, he was unable to convince others of this golden opportunity and gave up in disgust.

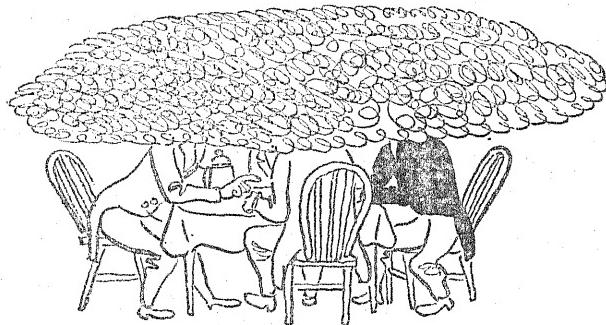
Feeling himself in bad odor, he went to Cologne. There he became editor of a radical newspaper. Soon he was widely known for his articles defending the freedom of the press, writing them with his right hand while blue-pencililing his reporters' articles with his left.

Finally the paper folded (it had been only slightly crumpled before), and Marx left for Paris. At the station to see him off were a dozen or so of his creditors, shaking their fists at him in what later came to be recognized as the Communist salute.

Before leaving Cologne, Marx married Jenny von Westphalen, resolutely overlooking the fact that she came of a wealthy family and he was out of work. They had an idyllic honeymoon, during which Marx filled five large notebooks with extracts from his reading.

In Paris, Marx wrote for a revolutionary German-language paper, *Vorwärts*, which was largely ignored by the good citizens of Paris, most of whom did not own a German-French dictionary. Every evening he plotted and schemed in smoke-filled rooms, where he developed a dim view of the future. When one of Marx's articles advocated murdering the King of Prussia, many thought this was going too far. Why not murder the King of France, who was close by? The King, Louis Philippe, grew

RICHARD ARMOUR



Smokers in a plot-filled room

uneasy at this sort of talk, closed down the paper, and ordered Marx to leave Paris within twenty-four hours. Marx intended to settle somewhere outside the city limits, but left with such a burst of speed that his momentum carried him all the way to Belgium.

PERSONAL APPEARANCE

Marx soon became a familiar figure in Brussels. His large head, short legs, and square trunk made a lasting impression, especially on his mattress. Failing to gain average height, he had grown a bushy, untrimmed beard to hide his disappointment. During years of poverty, it kept his throat and chest warm and saved him the price of a scarf. Only his wife, who died without revealing his secret, knew whether he ever wore a tie or, indeed, had a neck.

About this time Marx stopped going to a barber, being unable to sit there and listen while someone else talked. So his hair grew down over his ears and neck and mingled with his beard, setting a style for spies, revolutionaries, poets, and makers of cough drops.

COLLABORATION WITH ENGELS

Marx was joined in Brussels by Friedrich Engels, his friend and co-worker. Engels thought Marx was a genius, and Marx

IT ALL STARTED WITH MARX

agreed. Everywhere Marx went, Engels tagged right behind him. The only time Engels became a nuisance was when the two of them went through a revolving door together.

Engels was severely handicapped by being the son of a textile industrialist, but at least learned to tell a spindle from a spinster. Marx, on the other hand, did not see a worker up close until he was in his thirties, and even then in meetings and not in factories.

He found it easier to understand workers if he kept away from them. After all, Marx was a philosopher, and it was hard for him to think if he got tangled up with reality. It is true that he often got his hands grimy and black, but that was from changing his typewriter ribbon.

REVOLUTIONARY IDEAS

Increasingly Marx came to feel that the world must be changed and that he was the man for the job. Humanity must be freed from three besetting evils: (1) marriage, (2) religion, and (3) private property. Since Marx had no religion and no private property, he himself was in pretty good shape. As for marriage, it may be significant that most of those who subscribed to the Marx-Engels conviction that marriage *must* be done away with were married men.

All about him Marx saw class struggle. In economic life it was between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. In schools it was between pupils and teachers. Marx thought something could be done to improve the position of the proletariat, which at that time was prone. The best way to help the proletariat, or working class, was to do away with the bourgeoisie, or property-owning class.

What qualified Marx for his proletariat (he already had his baccalaureate) was the work he did with his hands. Bending over a desk in the public library, he lifted ideas out of books morning till night.

Marx wanted a classless society. He was absolutely on the level about this. He also wished to substitute labor for money,

RICHARD ARMOUR

which would make banks and cash registers unnecessary and counterfeiting impossible.

Marx was a visionary and could look far into the future, though he was not a 20-20 visionary. For instance he foresaw a time when the State would "wither away," leaving nothing but a few dried-up civil service employees forgotten at their posts. What he did not see, perhaps because of a speck on his spectacles, was a State that instead of withering grew and grew-some more.

At any rate Marx set out to give the laboring class a chance to suffer in a new way. He spread his doctrine far and wide, and sometimes spread it pretty thin. When he was not lecturing, he wrote feverishly.¹

THE COMMUNIST MANIFESTO

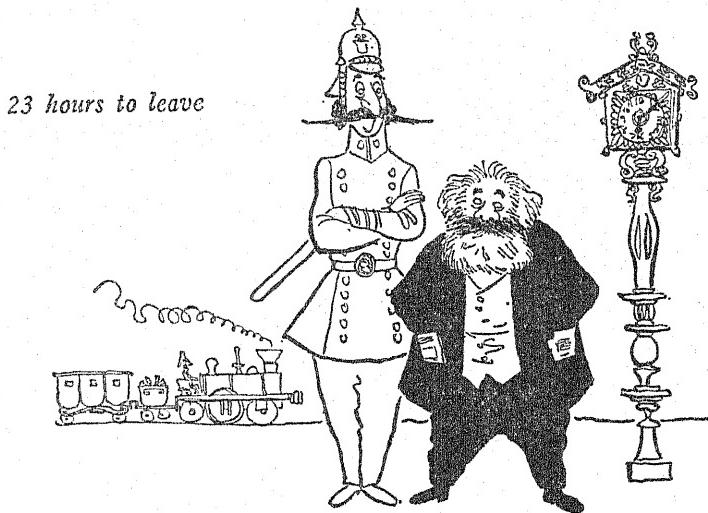
In 1847 the Communists held a convention in London. They came from all over Europe, each determined to be the life of the Party. Needing something to discuss, a nostrum for the rostrum, they asked Marx to prepare them a platform, suitably heavy and wooden.

So it was that Marx wrote *The Communist Manifesto*. Its most memorable part is the opening sentence: "A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of Communism." Obviously Marx hoped by this transparent device to attract readers of ghost stories and make inroads on the Edgar Allan Poe market.

The use of the term "Communist" in the *Manifesto* helped make the word popular, especially among Communists. Indeed the League of the Just, to which Marx belonged, changed its name to the Communist League, possibly because of jibes about "Just what?" From the closing sentences of the *Manifesto* the Communists devised their stirring motto: "Workers of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains!" Though in some instances their chains were heirlooms, handed down for generations, they were willing to make the sacrifice.

¹ He did his best writing when he had a temperature of 102 degrees or over. Sometimes, we are told, he wrote "at a white heat," and must have been a really sick man.

IT ALL STARTED WITH MARX



ENFORCED TRAVEL

In 1848, Marx was contributing to several newspapers as well as to the general unrest. Because of this he was given 24 hours to leave Brussels. The order to leave caught him napping. By the time he awoke, there was no chance to gather up such personal effects as his toothbrush, his washcloth, or his wife.

After a brief sojourn in Paris he went on to Cologne, where he edited another radical paper and hatched plots. This latter was difficult for Marx, a nervous man who seldom sat long in one spot. However, he persevered for the good of the Cause, and was notably effective in making the bourgeoisie and the proletariat see the antagonism which had existed for years between them, unnoticed.

But now Marx was given 23 hours to leave Germany. By this time he was adept at living out of a suitcase, and needed only to snap the latches. Back to Paris he went. After only one month he was asked to leave in 22 hours. They were tightening upon him. His picture appeared in post offices and government

RICHARD ARMOUR

buildings, marked Unwanted. A philosopher by trade, he took this philosophically. Besides, it gave him a new Communist slogan: Join the Party and See the World.

Marx had only two places left to go—England or prison. Through an anguished night he was torn by Indecision and tormented by Doubt. At the last minute (i.e., after 21 hours and 59 minutes) he decided on England, fearful that the dampness of the Paris dungeon might aggravate his rheumatism. Apparently no one had told him about English weather.

MARX IN ENGLAND

He arrived in London in a fog. Soon he was joined by his wife and three (later six) children, who were intensely loyal to him and had no place else to go.

Marx's disguise



In London Marx spent the second half of his life attending meetings of secret societies. Some of these were so secret that he was never told their names or where they met, and therefore often arrived late. Most of the members put on false beards to disguise themselves. Since Marx's beard was the real thing, disguise posed a problem. He solved it by parting his beard in the middle and slicking down his hair.

IT ALL STARTED WITH MARX

Marx went from place to place lecturing on economics. He had to keep moving, because he was being closely watched by the authorities, especially the authorities on economics. During his university career he had majored in law and philosophy. It must have been a relief to Marx that his audiences were mostly made up of working men who knew nothing whatever about the subject, being too busy earning a living to read up on how they were doing it.

FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT

In the 1850s Marx contributed to the *New York Tribune*, as Republicans would like to forget. The editor was the famous Horace Greeley. His advice, "Go west, young man," was completely lost on Marx, who never ventured beyond London's West End.

Marx specialized in writing vividly about wars and revolutions, though he was unable to see anything of them unless they took place in the street in front of the British Museum. It was there that he wrote his masterful eyewitness accounts of the Turko-Russian War. His dispatches¹ invariably got to New York before those written by impractical reporters in the Near East, who had a penchant for realism.

Marx was paid five dollars an article by the *Tribune*. He considered himself underpaid, and this increased his annoyance with capitalism. Since he would have starved to death without this income, the *Tribune* might have saved the world from Communism by either paying Marx nothing or paying him more.

POVERTY AND DISAPPOINTMENT

In his later years Marx was very poor. But for the money from the *Tribune* and gifts from Engels, who had reluctantly inherited a cotton mill, he would have been unable to buy paper and pencil. The Marx-Engels correspondence is full of long, involved letters by Marx concerning economic philosophy, usually centering on such basic questions as "Where is my

¹ Which, as is sometimes forgotten, were bitterly anti-Russian.

RICHARD ARMOUR

money?" Marx's exploitation of Engels is an interesting reversal of Marxist theory. In this instance a proletarian exploited a bourgeois.

Always Marx was waiting for the capitalistic world to collapse. Each morning he would throw off the covers and leap from bed crying, "Workers of the world, arise!" Then he would run to get the newspaper, goose-pimply with anticipation, hoping for a headline such as "Western World Collapses" or "Bubonic Plague Carries Off Millions of Capitalists."

Unfortunately nothing horrible happened, no catastrophe occurred. Indeed the only really gloomy articles he found that cheered him up were those he had written himself.

Marx's fondest dream was of a great war with long casualty lists made up of bourgeoisie who had stupidly enlisted to protect their property. The proletariat, having no such motive, would of course not enlist, and the intellectuals, like Marx, would have bad eyesight from excessive reading and be exempt from the draft.

Thus it was that he took great joy in the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870. As its bloody battles raged, taking a heavy toll of capitalists and anyone else who got in the way of a bullet, Marx became the happiest man alive. But the war came to an early end, alas, with the defeat of Napoleon III at the Battle of Sedan, and Marx was again plunged into gloom.

DAS KAPITAL

All this time Marx was writing his *magnum opus*. This was *Das Kapital*, the first volume of which appeared in 1867. It is not, as many suppose, a treatise on punctuation. Nor is it a guidebook to the historic sights of Berlin. Engels called it "the Bible of the working classes," perhaps because it was the Genesis of Communism and (he hoped) the Exodus of Capitalism.

In this famous work Marx propounded his doctrine of class struggle and his "theory of change." This latter was his belief that, over the centuries, the bourgeoisie had slyly made change

IT ALL STARTED WITH MARX

in such a way as to impoverish the gullible proletariat. Even more revolutionary was his "theory of surplus value," whereby he declared that all capitalists are surplus and of value only to themselves.

Marx did not live to complete *Das Kapital*, nor have many people lived to finish reading it. However, it was continued by his friend Engels, who made use of Marx's papers, both daily and Sunday. After the work got up to three thick volumes, Engels died, having overtaxed his heart by lifting all three at once.

ILLNESS AND DEATH

In his final years Marx suffered from acute mental depression, no doubt because peace kept hanging on and there was no sign of a rift in the black pall of prosperity. Afflicted by headaches and insomnia, not to mention polemics and a bad case of diatribes, he became bedridden.

But he continued his studies to the end, working out a technique whereby anything involved and unclear would be taken as profound. This technique came to be known as Marxmanship, and was an early predecessor of Gamesmanship.

Finally, on March 14, 1883, the Father of Communism died. He left behind him some of the most significant books in the field of philosophy and economics, most of them borrowed from the library and long overdue.

The influence of Marx being, as one scholar states, "incalculable," we shall make no attempt to calculate it.

RUSSIA BEFORE THE REVOLUTION

DURING ALL HIS YEARS of theorizing, Marx seems to have turned his back on Russia, a dangerous thing to do. The best opportunity for social upheaval, he thought, was in highly industrialized countries, where, in crowded factories, capital and labor would be at each other's throats, rubbing Adam's apples until irritation was inevitable.

But Marx, never having been a farmer, failed to realize that factories are not a fertile field. Had he lived longer, he would have been amazed to see that the ideas which he sowed between rows of machinery in Germany and England came up in the broad farmlands of Russia. What carried the seeds of revolt to Russia? Secret couriers? Prevailing winds? Birds?

At any rate, Russia was overdue for a revolution. France, Germany, and Italy had had at least one a century, and Russia was dragging her feet revolutionwise. Let us briefly survey the history of Russia and see why the Time was Ripe, in 1888, for the Revolution of 1917.

THE LAND

Modern Russia, which occupies more than one-sixth of the land surface of the world, is so large that it slops over from Europe into Asia and vice versa. The two parts are separated by such natural barriers as mountains, rivers, and dotted lines. From earliest times the Russian has had plenty of elbow room, which explains why he puts his hands on his hips when dancing. Vast forests have provided lumber and fuel as well as a place

IT ALL STARTED WITH MARX

to hide from secret police and weekend guests. The long winter nights have led to a morbid fear of insomnia. Despite great wealth of natural resources, there has always been a shortage of certain articles, such as "the" and "a" for which there are no words in Russian.

COMING OF THE SLAVS

The ancestors of the modern Russians were Slavs, which is why the Russians do not go in for ancestor worship. Other nomadic races, such as the Vikings and the Mongols, penetrated the vast land that was later to become Russia, but "all of them were absorbed by the Slavs," whose skin was no doubt in great demand for use as blotting paper.

Indeed some anthropologists and archeologists believe that the Garden of Eden may have been in what is now the southern part of Russia. If true, this would mean that Adam and Eve, who were banished without due process of law, were the first of a long line of Displaced Persons.

NEXT THE VIKINGS

In the ninth century the Slavs invited the Vikings, under the leadership of Rurik, to come south for the winter and join them in sports and social activities, such as fighting the Turks. The Vikings, whose spears were growing rusty from disuse, accepted with Alacrity. (Rurik's second cousin.) So quickly did they arrive that the Slavs called them "Rush" or "Russ," which some think is the origin of the word "Russian."

Rurik was followed by Oleg, known as Oleg the Bowleg because of his many years in the saddle.

After Oleg came Svyatoslav, who called himself Svyatoslav the Great, no doubt to distinguish himself from all other Svyatoslavs.

Under such memorable rulers as Vladimir I, Yaroslav (called "The Wise" by one of his retainers, who was no fool himself), and Vladimir Monomach ("Mac" to his intimates), Russia expanded.

RICHARD ARMOUR

TROUBLE WITH THE TARTARS

In the thirteenth century Russia was harassed by the Tartars, who swept in from the east and threatened to replace Russian dressing with Tartar sauce.

The Tartars, led by Genghis Khan, were a tough lot.¹ "A week afield with nothing to eat but mare's milk and blood," says one historian, "was common practice," especially by those on an ulcer diet. Mare's milk was sometimes in short supply, but blood was always plentiful.

One of the Russian heroes of this period was Alexander Nevsky. Against a superior force of Germans, this shrewd warrior picked as his battleground the frozen Lake Peipus. The Germans got cold feet and fled westward with sniffles and chil-blains. (Some consider this the original Cold War.)

THE KREMLIN, ETC.

Toward the end of the fourteenth century, after the Tartar menace passed, one Dmitry Donskoi ordered a great stone wall, called the Kremlin, to be built. Aware that stone walls do not a prison make, subsequent rulers made such suitable additions as dungeons, torture chambers, knout racks, and bins for storing spare skulls. Equally important, under Ivan III in 1472, was adoption of the double-headed eagle as Russia's coat of arms. This came about when Ivan discovered that two heads are better than one, especially when they face in opposite directions and your enemies don't know whether you are coming or going.

It was in the time of Dmitry that, as one historian puts it, "The Russians found a ford and crossed the Don." If true, this not only substantiates the claim that a Russian invented the automobile in the Middle Ages but indicates that an early model was virtually waterproof.

¹ Cf. the well-known saying, "Scratch a Russian and find a Tartar." What you would have found if you had scratched a Tartar we can only imagine.

IT ALL STARTED WITH MARX

IVAN THE TERRIBLE

With only a brief mention of the twenty-eight-year reign of Basil III, we come with no little pleasure to Basil's son, Ivan IV, called Ivan the Severe by those given to understatement but Ivan the Terrible by most. Mistreated as a boy, when he came to the throne, he executed everyone who had been unkind to him in his youth, and for a generation thereafter Russia was sparsely populated. Interestingly enough, he was the first Russian ruler to call himself "Tsar." He had intended to make it "Caesar," but his tongue got caught in his teeth.

Ivan was given to fits of fury. In one of these he struck his favorite son with a steel-tipped staff, killing him. Afterward he was remorseful, having intended only to batter the lad into insensibility.

The Russian line, going back to Rurik, finally came to an end, but not until after a little difficulty with the so-called False Dmitri, who claimed to be a son of Ivan and acted almost as Terrible.

Boris Godunov, a commoner, but no commoner than most, was crazy to be Czar. At first he pretended not to want the throne, but his supporters insisted. "What's Godunov for us," they said, "is Godunov for anybody." Shortly after being made Czar by popular acclaim, Boris became hated by everyone, and it is no wonder that popular elections lost their popularity with Russian rulers.

FIRST OF THE ROMANOVS

About this time the Romanov dynasty began. Michael Romanov, the first of the line, thought he ruled divinely. (i.e., by Divine Right.) His son, Alexis, had to put up with some grumbling by the serfs, who were rather disagreeable about starving to death. But he made a substantial contribution to this period of Russian history, known as the Time of Trouble.

Modern Russia began, however, with Peter the Great (1672-1725), who personally cut the beards off his nobles to make

RICHARD ARMOUR

them look like Europeans. When they still looked too much like Russians, he cut their heads off. Peter liked to keep busy. He built up the Russian Army and the Russian Navy, defeated Sweden and Turkey, slew plotters with his own hand (in which he held a sword), edited the first newspaper to make sure of getting a good press, and built a window to Europe where he sat by the hour looking through binoculars until he became known as Peeping Pete.

During the forty-three years of Peter's reign, according to a trustworthy historian, "the serfs had no voice," apparently afflicted with chronic laryngitis. But the serfs worried Peter less than the Cossacks. These were trick horsemen who could gallop up the steppes and right into the palace. We are told that they carried off women and livestock, perhaps a comely wench under one arm and a comely cow under the other. Sometimes they put villages to the torch; other times they did it the easy way, putting the torch to villages.

ERA OF CATHERINE THE GREAT

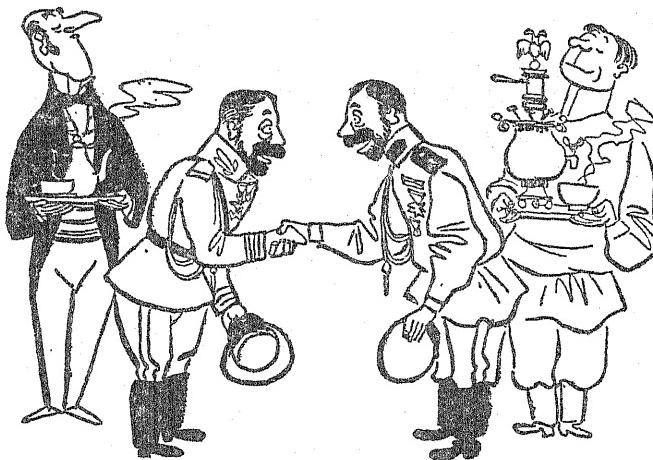
Passing over Peter the Great's successors, such as Peter II, Catherine (the Lesser), and Elizabeth, who died with a glass of cherry brandy at her lips, we come to Catherine the Great. Under Catherine, whose weight was considerable, Russia spread, taking in the Crimea and part of Poland.

Then, during the reign of Catherine's grandson, Alexander I, Napoleon posed a threat. However, Napoleon and Alexander signed a treaty of friendship (see Hitler and Stalin, below) which was to last forever. Shortly before the expiration date, Napoleon led his army into Russia. In the winter campaign that followed, Napoleon learned the strategic value of long marches and long underwear and came out ahead. That is, he came out ahead of Alexander, who chased him all the way back to Paris.

LAST OF THE ROMANOVS

The Romanov dynasty was beginning to show signs of wear and tear. Nicholas I, though firmly in the saddle, had feet of

IT ALL STARTED WITH MARX



George and Nicholas: "Your face is familiar."

clay, which tended to cake in the stirrups. Even the horses were beginning to notice. Alexander II, hoping to be remembered as the Abraham Lincoln of Russia although he looked ridiculous in a stovepipe hat, liberated the serfs, giving each a piece of land too small to live on. But being a do-good did no good for Alex. He was blown up by terrorists who didn't think he was moving fast enough.

Alexander III, the father of the last Czar, is said to have taken "the long view of Russia," i.e., from St. Petersburg to Vladivostok. He believed in "Russia for the Russians," which was easy because conditions were so bad that no one else wanted the place. Food was short, and so were millions of undernourished peasants. Once the train in which Alexander was riding was blown off the tracks, and not by high winds.

The last and noblest Romanov of them all was Nicholas II, who looked so much like King George V of England that they were often mistaken, though Nicholas was mistaken more often than George.

RICHARD ARMOUR

Russia took part in two wars during the reign of Nicholas, losing to Japan in 1905 and doing none too well against Germany in World War I. War was getting unpopular, and so was the Czar. Bombs, we are told, "began to fly," though most were still the old-fashioned kind that had to be thrown. Many were left under chairs and tables, and not because their owners were forgetful.

Nicholas wasn't helped much by Rasputin, a rascally monk whom someone had called "the axle on which revolved the destinies of Russia." Anyhow, he was a big wheel. Rasputin, who held the Czarina in the palm of his hand, believed that sin was necessary to salvation, and did all he could to see that everyone was saved. Though no Marxist, he was nonetheless enthusiastic about free love, insisting that the best things in life are free. He was finally murdered by a group of conservative noblemen who believed in paying their way. They had to poison him, shoot him, and drown him before he gave up. Then he died of a broken heart, suddenly aware of his unpopularity.

Russia had been ready for the Revolution of 1917 for some time, and now that it was 1917 it could be postponed no longer. The curtain was about to go up on one of the Great Dramas of History, and pacing nervously in the wings was an obscure actor named Nicolai V. Lenin.



LENIN

LENIN, who put Marx's theories into practice, was born in Simbirsk on the Volga on April 22, 1870. He was named Vladimir Ilyich Ulianov and thus had something to revolt against from the very beginning. As a baby, Vladimir had a bald, domelike head to which, in later life, he added a mustache and pointed beard.

Vladimir's father, Ilya Ulianov, was a provincial school-teacher. A stern, righteous man, he was conservative in politics and devoutly religious. Fortunately he died too early to know how his sons turned out.

EARLY TENDENCIES

Vladimir worshiped his older brother, Alexander, who was a terror in his youth and a terrorist when he reached manhood. Alexander plotted to assassinate the Czar but was caught red-handed, and hanged. Vladimir, who had counted on receiving his brother's castoff clothing for some years, was understandably upset.

RICHARD ARMOUR

He took to reading *Das Kapital*. This he did in the kitchen, probably because reading about poverty made him hungry and he wanted to be where he could grab a bite of *kavkaski shasslik* before starting the next chapter. His sister Anna has given us a vivid description of the young scholar at work. "Sitting on the kitchen stove . . . and making violent gesticulations," she writes, "he would tell me with burning enthusiasm about the principles of Marxist theory. . . ." As his enthusiasm burst into flames, no doubt his gesticulations became wilder and his screams louder, until Anna pulled him down from the stove and dropped him in the sink.¹

STUDENT OF LAW

Vladimir entered Kazan University in October, 1887, and was expelled in December of the same year. Something he had done was displeasing to the authorities, possibly his use of laboratory periods to assemble bombs which he lobbed into the dean's residence. A period ensued when Vladimir studied law at home. He read assiduously and, unhampered by professors, made rapid progress.

Eventually Vladimir took the law examinations at St. Petersburg University and passed with flying colors.² His mother hoped he would now join the Moscow branch of some big Wall Street firm, but his brief practice was not such as to attract outside offers. "He acted for the defendants in a few petty criminal cases," says one admiring biographer, "and in every instance lost."

PRISON AND EXILE

It was not malpractice of the law, however, that led to his imprisonment, but the pursuit of his avocation, which was inciting revolt. Closing his law office, he went underground, taking

¹ In a footnote on the next page Lenin's biographer writes: "Lenin started to smoke at this time."

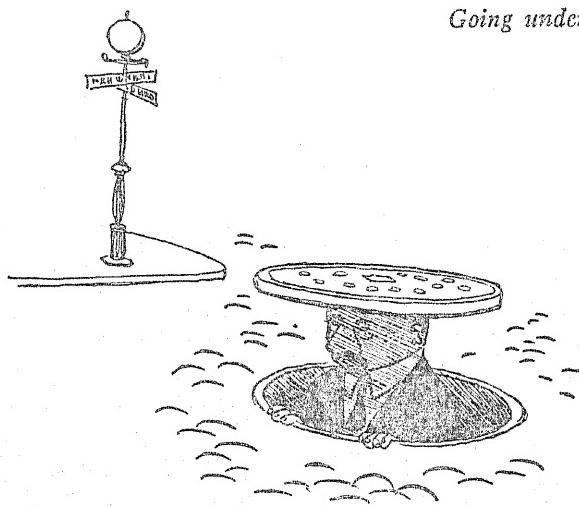
² Without ever attending. See Marx and his Ph.D. at Jena, above. This sort of thing naturally makes Communism popular with students.

IT ALL STARTED WITH MARX

with him the complete works of Marx and a large supply of candles. His revolutionary tendencies became known throughout St. Petersburg, and every time he lifted a manhole cover he was shadowed by the secret police, who thus deprived him of the healthful benefits of sunshine.

The first time he was arrested it was for crossing the frontier with a double-bottomed suitcase full of illegal literature, the precise nature of which we do not know. He may only have been trafficking in French postcards and slightly soiled novels.

Going underground



His jailers were sensitive types who did not appreciate the traces of his former environment, the sewer. To clean him up and make a shining example of him, they washed their dirty Lenin in public.

Determined and resourceful, Lenin was not to be stopped by mere humiliation. While in prison, he wrote pamphlets and books in invisible ink, despite the almost unbelievable difficulty of proofreading. After fourteen months of pamphleteering, he was released from prison and banished to Siberia.

RICHARD ARMOUR

He rather enjoyed Siberia, for he had time to read and write and dream about revolution. Often he played chess with peasants whom he taught the rudiments of the game but not the fine points. The stark beauty of Siberia appealed to him, and in one of his letters to his mother he wrote: "While at Krasnoyarsk I wrote some poetry starting with 'In the village of Shushensk, beneath the mountains of Sayansk.' Unfortunately I never got beyond the first stanza." What was so unfortunate about this he failed to say.

While in Siberia, Lenin married a fellow intellectual, Nadezhda Krupskaya, whom he had met romantically in St. Petersburg when she was distributing his leaflets to factory workers.

It is true that he despised legal marriage. But, we are told, he "went through the motions" with Nadezhda, both of them apparently keeping their fingers crossed throughout the ceremony.

A PUBLISHING VENTURE

Released from Siberia, Lenin made his way to Germany, where he published a revolutionary paper called *Iskra*. It was printed on onionskin paper, good for smuggling into Russia where it could be used for making onion soup after being read. After a time, however, the printer in Munich refused to continue. This sensitive man was unable to take it, day after day, watching his typesetters weep over their presses. So Lenin headed for London, muttering imprecations against German sentimentality.

IN LONDON

In London, Lenin bought a street map and soon learned where he could find the most ugliness and poverty. He loved to depress himself by a good walk through the slums.

Mostly he sat in the library of the British Museum, reading Marx, perhaps in the very seat where Marx had read Hegel and

IT ALL STARTED WITH MARX

where later generations of intellectuals were to read Lenin. Had the bourgeoisie removed the chairs from the library of the British Museum, they might long since have put an end to Communism.

FURTHER TRAVELS

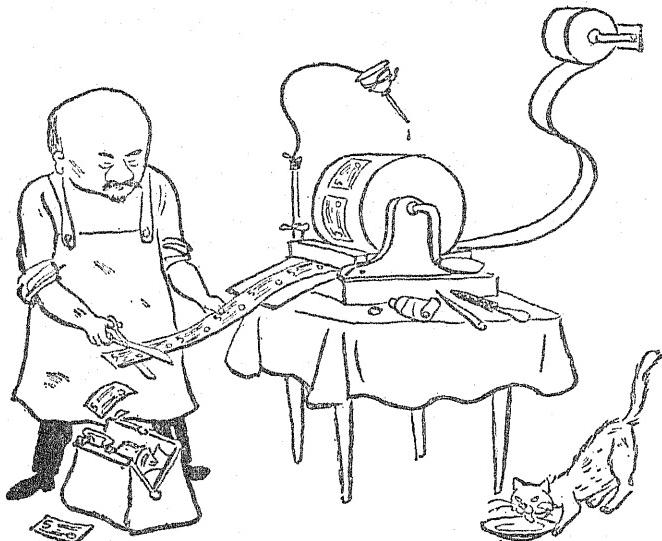
The offices of *Iskra* were now moved to Switzerland, and Lenin went with them, stubbornly remaining at his desk. At this time Lenin was one of the leaders of the Social Democrats —a group cleverly named, since they were neither. However they did attempt to pep up their dismal meetings with games and amusements, such as Pin-the-Tail-on-the-Banker and Cut-the-Head-off-the-Capitalist, and therefore became known as "the Party." But a split ensued between the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks, led by Lenin. (The word Bolsheviks was soon corrupted to Bolsheviks, and we shall henceforth use the latter.) Sharp differences of opinion arose. For instance the Bolsheviks wanted to hang capitalists from every lamppost, while the more moderate Mensheviks proposed hanging them from every other lamppost.

Lenin was forever crossing off the days and weeks on his calendar, growing increasingly impatient for the Revolution of 1917. In 1905 he went back to Russia and took part in a small-sized dress rehearsal. After working the Bolsheviks into a frenzy with his speeches, in which he urged them to shoot, stab, or burn, he left for Finland. From there he was able to watch the rise and fall of the armed revolt with a certain detachment.

After this abortive revolution, Lenin needed to raise funds for the Party. For some reason wealthy people seemed unwilling to donate. Being a very practical man, Lenin solved the problem by printing his own money, and further augmented his income by supervising the robbing of banks. He would see his fund raisers off every morning, urging them to mangle or strangle anyone who stood in their way.

In 1912 the Bolsheviks began publishing a newspaper in St.

RICHARD ARMOUR



A practical financier

Petersburg called *Pravda*,¹ and Lenin was the unofficial editor. However, he stayed in Cracow, across the border, since the sound of whirring presses and the smell of printer's ink made him giddy.

AT THE OUTBREAK OF WORLD WAR I

When World War I broke out, Lenin was delighted to think that the flower of Russia, France, Germany, Austria, and England would be destroyed. For all he cared, soldiers could go into Holland too, and trample down the tulips. From a vantage point in Switzerland he shouted encouraging slogans to both sides. He showed absolutely no fear of shot, shell, or strained vocal cords.

At this time Lenin, who was in his mid-forties, is described as having high cheekbones, intense eyes, a bald head, and a

¹ The Russian word for "truth," and you will have to take their word for it.

IT ALL STARTED WITH MARX

pointed beard (or, in some translations, bold eyes and a pointed head). He had a brief affair with a certain Madame K., but dropped her when he discovered that she had never read *Das Kapital*.

REVOLUTION AT LAST

Lenin was in Switzerland, expecting an uprising in Italy and keeping hopefully in touch with England, when the Revolution of 1917 took place in Russia. The Czar was ousted and the Soviet government took over. This was the sort of thing Lenin had been dreaming of for years, and here he was hemmed in by Alpine scenery, unable to see that long-awaited massacre of the nobility. He was suddenly sick of Swiss cheese and edelweiss. He wanted to get to Russia the worst way.

This turned out to be a sealed train, Lenin being too large for a sealed envelope. On this Famous Ride across Germany, then at war with Russia, Lenin was kept from getting off to buy a newspaper or give a speech.

Lenin's train arrived on time¹ at the Finland station, which naturally is not in Finland but in Russia. Lenin had not set foot on the soil of his homeland in ten years, and, since he was at once hoisted onto the shoulders of the enthusiastic crowd awaiting him, it appeared he would have to wait a little longer.

STRUGGLE FOR POWER

Then followed an exciting time of revolution, counterrevolution, and counter-counterrevolution. The Provisional Government, under Kerensky, had more provisions, but the Bolsheviks, under Lenin, had a superior supply of slogans. Day after day he worked bravely at his desk. In the small hours of the morning (during which he worked under greater pressure than in the large hours of the afternoon) he would come forth with some such battle cry as "The time is now!" or, in a moment of inspiration, "Now is the time!" These he would hand to a messen-

¹ That is, in 1917.

RICHARD ARMOUR

ger, to be carried posthaste to Bolshevik Party Headquarters.

Eventually, however, Kerensky got the upper hand and Lenin was forced to flee to Finland.¹ He traveled Incognito, which cost a little more than Third Class but was worth the difference. In Finland he stayed for several days in a haystack, which was very nearly the last straw.

From Finland, Lenin kept sending messages and slogans to Bolshevik leaders in Russia, urging them to lay down their lives for the Revolution. At first they were unenthusiastic. But on November 7, 1917,² the Bolsheviks seized the government.

LENIN TAKES OVER

As head of the new government, Lenin speedily established what he called a dictatorship of the proletariat. "Every man a dictator" was his finest slogan, though he reserved for himself the right to be the dictator's dictator.

Lenin's first step was to take over the State Bank. As its director he appointed Vladimir Kopek, a Bolshevik with unusual banking experience: for many years he had had a small checking account. As assistant director he named Ivan Bala-pointski, a man who had made his mark, being unable to sign his name. Gone were the days when the Bolsheviks had to hold up armored trucks to obtain funds for the Party.

The next step was to close down all the newspapers, since Lenin felt that the Russian people were wasting valuable man-hours puzzling over the truth. A few papers, such as *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, were permitted to resume publication in order that the full text of Lenin's speeches could be printed for public consumption.

Finally, Lenin established the Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counterrevolution and Speculation, known by those who didn't want to take all day about it as Cheka. Its members were the secret police, later called OGPU, NKVD, MVD, and

¹ Where he arrived, we presume, at the Russian station.

² Called the October Revolution by someone who had forgotten to change his calendar.

IT ALL STARTED WITH MARX

PSST! Lenin got so he preferred Chekas to chess. He ordered them to shoot at sight, or even at sound, anyone plotting against the government.

IN THE KREMLIN

Lenin, who had come to power in St. Petersburg, soon moved to Moscow and took up residence in the Kremlin, a building full of secret passages, secret police, drafty halls, and the sweet smell of arsenic. He immediately felt at home. In his office he kept a blackboard where he could readily post the latest figures on the number of bourgeoisie removed from (1) office, (2) Russia, (3) this mortal coil.

He maintained stern discipline. At meetings of the People's Commissars, over which Lenin presided, smoking was forbidden. There was always the possibility of bombs under the table.

CIVIL WAR

It must not be supposed that all Russians eagerly accepted Lenin as their leader. Among those who were unenthusiastic were the Cossacks, the Right Social Revolutionaries, the Wrong Social Revolutionaries, terrorists who thought him not terrible enough, splinter groups (some of whom had gone all to pieces), Army officers, and several million starving peasants. These stubborn people waged a Civil War against the Bolsheviks for almost three years. One Social Revolutionary, a woman named Dora Kaplan, "succeeded in lodging a bullet in the spine of Lenin." Lodgings for bullets were at a premium, so many backs already being occupied.

The conflict seesawed (and teeter-tottered) across Russia. In the north a threat was posed by troops under a quarrelsome general by the name of Wrangel. To the west there was opposition from Poland, and first Pilsudski was thrown back across the Bug and then the Bug was thrown back across Pilsudski. On still another front enemy forces were repelled by Trotsky, who was repelling when he wasn't revolting.

RICHARD ARMOUR

Finally the opponents of the Bolsheviks were routed, most of them to the United States and other capitalist countries. Grand dukes became headwaiters. Grand duchesses became nursemaids. Counts and countesses gave language lessons, teaching movie stars how to pronounce English with a Russian accent. Some worked as porters but tired of it and became exporters. Many went into vodka or caviar, in the latter instance up to their elbows. Dressed in coats with moth-eaten fur collars, these proud *émigrés* gathered in dimly lit Russian restaurants to listen to the strumming of balalaikas, drink toasts to the Czar, and compare notes about openings for doormen. As the years went by, they gradually went pale with longing for the Good Old Days and became known as White Russians.

DREAMS OF WORLD REVOLUTION

Not satisfied with taking over Russia, Lenin dreamed of a great revolution that would spread Communism all over the world. He coveted for everyone the right to be purged without trial or prescription.

To this end he developed the Communist International, or Comintern. With this he hoped to overthrow the bourgeois governments of neighboring countries, in what came to be known as his Bad Neighbor Policy. He hoped to achieve the result with bloodshed, but was willing to do it peacefully if all other means failed.

RUSSIA UNDER LENIN

A NEW DAY was dawning, and the tsars were dimming in the east. Difficulties might lie ahead, but only during a brief transitional period. Everyone happily tightened his belt, or put on suspenders.

In the new government, the working class was the base. This situation was readily accepted by the Russian peasants, who had had centuries of experience in starting at the bottom and remaining there. They had nothing to lose, they were told, but their chains, and they were ready to make the sacrifice.

THE VOTING SYSTEM

It has been rumored that Lenin's government provided no opportunity for the common man to vote. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The Russian worker was kept so busy voting that production in factories and on farms was seriously affected. The reason for so much voting was that each village elected a village soviet which elected a canton soviet which elected a district soviet which elected a national soviet which elected a large committee which elected a small central committee which elected a chairman who, since he didn't believe in God, refused to let things go any farther.

Voting was by a show of hands and had to be at least unanimous. This made it easy to see who voted for whom and simplified the work of the secret police, who were always on the lookout for Deviationists, Tangentialists, and Peripheralists.

While peasants and workers had their hands up, Commissars were given a splendid opportunity to pick their pockets, which, alas, were usually empty.

RICHARD ARMOUR

Under Lenin, the name of the Bolshevik Party was changed to the Communist Party. The Party started at the grass roots, with members who preferred to remain underground, and went up to the All-Russian Congress, in which every Congressman was 100 per cent Russian. In actual control of the organization were what are referred to as "several small bodies" (probably dwarfs), named Politburo and Orgburo.

At first the Government and the Communist Party were separate, except for the fact that you had to be a member of the Party to get into the Government. Eventually the Party discouraged competition by outlawing all parties except itself for the sake of clarity, simplicity, and the Communist Party.

LIFE IN THE FACTORY

There was an impressive change in the life of factory workers. For one thing, they formed themselves into committees and spent most of their time making motions. These were usually with fists clenched, in the direction of the management. Industrial production fell off, but there was a boom in the Russian edition of *Robert's Rules of Order*.

Behind every worker stood a Commissar, handing him his hammer, sickle, and screwdriver. Behind every Commissar, of course, was another Commissar, and behind that Commissar still another Commissar, all the way from the factory to the Kremlin. The farther back a Commissar was, the higher his rank, which meant that a Commissar got ahead by getting behind. Now and then a visiting peasant would try to edge into line, thinking everyone must be queued up for a bowl of borsch. Until his death, Lenin was the last man in the line, a situation which was reversed when crowds came to see how he was making out in his tomb.

LIFE ON THE FARM

In farming areas, meanwhile, an even more significant change was being instituted. Under the Czars, Russian farmers had

IT ALL STARTED WITH MARX

been of only two classes: Industrious and Lazy. But Lenin, who was thought to believe in a classless society, slyly divided them into three classes in order to confuse his critics.¹ These were the poor peasant, or *bednyak*, the middle-class peasant, or *double-bednyak*, and the upper-class peasant, or *kulak*, who affected high-toned manners, such as stirring his tea with his little finger crooked.

Lenin's objective was to get the three classes of peasants so busy fighting each other that they wouldn't notice when his agents, disguised as tractors,² carried off the newly harvested crops. It remained for Stalin, however, to solve the farm problem by plowing under the *Kulaks*, thereby reducing the number of mouths to feed and enriching the impoverished soil.

THE DEATH OF LENIN

If we have several times anticipated the death of Lenin, it should be ascribed not to faulty organization but to impatience. He died as a comparatively young man, in 1924, having "burnt himself out."

Lenin's body was embalmed and placed in a glass case in Red Square, where it may be viewed even today.³ Little did Lenin think he would end up as a Tourist Attraction.

¹ Or possibly to invite comparison with Julius Caesar and what he did with Gaul.

² With muffled treads.

³ Lenin had always wanted to make Russia a showcase of Communism, and it was fitting that he should become Exhibit A. For Exhibit B, see the end of the chapter on Stalin, below.



TROTSKY

THE NAMES of Lenin and Trotsky are popularly linked, much like those of Marx and Engels, Damon and Pythias, and Chesapeake and Ohio. These two Communist leaders saw eye to eye, both being on the short side and shortsighted.

Trotsky was the oddest looking of the top Communists, a strange little man with a pince-nez and a shock of black hair that stood on end as if his finger were in a light socket. Indeed we have read that on one occasion, when he suddenly arrived at a Party caucus, "his appearance was electrifying."

Trotsky, who was ten years younger than Lenin, had all the qualifications of a revolutionary leader. To wit:

1. He was born with a name, Lev Davydovich Bronstein, which could easily be changed to Trotsky.
2. He was expelled from school.
3. He spent the requisite number of years in prison and in exile.
4. He married a fellow intellectual, six years older than himself, irresistibly attracted by her high forehead and her low

IT ALL STARTED WITH MARX

shoes. Employing the Marxian dialectic, he won her by insisting that two can discuss socialist philosophy better than one.

BACKGROUND AND CHARACTER

From the outset, Trotsky felt himself a cut above his fellow revolutionaries. His father, although a peasant, was a well-to-do peasant who could afford little luxuries, such as an extra manure pile. It is true that this was the very type later liquidated by the Communists. But there is no use haggling over fine points.

There was something aloof and aristocratic in Trotsky's manner which ideally fitted him to be a champion of the common man. This coolness in his personality was doubtless a result of his long exile in the arctic. One of his contemporaries refers to his "acid tongue." This must have caused him no little discomfort and may explain his irritability.

CAREER OF REVOLUTION

Trotsky fell in with a group of radicals and by eighteen was printing illegal leaflets. These he circulated among factory workers, thus starting the first on-the-job training program.

He had found his calling. With Marx and Lenin he would go down in history as one of The Three Pamphleteers, marching arm in arm and chanting the old Nihilist motto: "None for all and all for none."

Eventually, however, he was caught and thrown into prison. There he married a fellow political prisoner, a Marxist named Alexandra Sokolovskaya. It was a romantic instance of cell mates becoming soul mates.

In prisons in Nikolayev, Odessa, and Moscow, Trotsky discovered a hidden talent, that of writing the words and music of revolutionary songs.

One of his earliest compositions is "Katchuska," written while he was recovering from an attack of sneezing brought on by the prison's dampness.

After two years, the door of Trotsky's cell was flung wide.

RICHARD ARMOUR

His jailers were music lovers and could take it no longer. He was exiled to Siberia, where he would be out of hearing.

In Siberia, Trotsky and his wife settled in the village of Ust-Kut, attracted by its euphonious name. It was a Godforsaken place, which increased its appeal for atheists. Soon Trotsky was lecturing anyone who would sit with him on a snowbank, arguing in favor of a rise in wages, living standards, and temperature. This was known as a caucus in the Caucasus. He also wrote for the Irkutsk paper, the *Nihilist News*. Wielding a pen helped his circulation, if not that of the paper.

MEETING WITH LENIN

In the summer of 1902, when he was twenty-three, the underground mail brought Trotsky a copy of one of Lenin's books. The book was entitled *What Is to Be Done?* Since Trotsky knew the answer, he must get to Lenin and tell him. So he escaped under a carload of hay, leaving a dummy in his bed. No one got wise to this for several days, though his guards thought it strange that Trotsky was leaving so much food on his plate.

Meanwhile the cart with its load of hay and Trotsky, who was engrossed in the *Iliad*, rumbled across Siberia toward freedom and better reading conditions. He arrived in London at dawn and immediately called on Lenin, with complete disregard for Visiting Hours.

It was a Great Meeting of Two Giants of Our Times, a fabled encounter in the annals of Communism. What matter if the giants were both barely five feet six? What matter if Trotsky was still slightly green from a rough Channel crossing, while Lenin, in a frayed dressing gown, was unable to suppress an occasional yawn?

The two world-shaking revolutionaries came together and shared their dreams. "Let me tell you about a dream I had last night," Lenin and Trotsky blurted out simultaneously. Both being superstitious, they hooked their little fingers together and

IT ALL STARTED WITH MARX

made a wish. What they discussed, as dawn turned to day, we can only conjecture, but we are told by Trotsky's biographer that "they talked for hours over a pot of coffee," probably warming themselves in the steam.

In subsequent years Trotsky was again exiled to Siberia, again escaped, and popped up in Vienna, Berlin, Zurich, Helsinki, Belgrade, Paris, Madrid, Cadiz, and the Bronx. Along about 1916 if you were sitting in a café in any of the capitals of the world and saw a little man at the next table with a shock of black hair, thick glasses, and a mustache and goatee, the chances are it wasn't Trotsky.

While changing places, Trotsky also changed names, his passports being issued to Arbuzov, Yanovsky, Vikentiev, Samokovlieff, and so on. He also changed wives, from Alexandra Sokolovskaya to Natalya Sedova.

HIS PART IN THE REVOLUTION

In 1917, when the Revolution broke out, Trotsky was in New York. There he experienced the pleasures and pains of capitalism. For a time Trotsky worked as a dishwasher, enraged at how much these capitalists left on their plates. At night, in his Bronx apartment, he whipped up the revolutionary fervor of his friends by showing them his dishpan hands.

When the call came (collect), Trotsky got to Petrograd as fast as he could. Since not even one-tenth of one per cent of the population were Bolsheviks, Lenin needed an orator like Trotsky to persuade the Russians that this was the party of the majority. Because Trotsky had been away from Russia so long, Lenin thought of calling him his Foreign Commissar. Later he made him Commissar for War, well knowing that if anyone was for war it was Trotsky.

Trotsky's greatest contribution was as the mobilizer of a huge army. While on recruiting tours, Trotsky dramatized his militarism by living in an armored train. Despite his lack of military training, Trotsky's tactics made all the generals look sick, espe-

RICHARD ARMOUR

cially when he ordered them into the front lines. At the close of World War I, the Soviet armies were fighting on six fronts, and Trotsky somehow managed to be everywhere at once, herding the stragglers before him and shouting, "Courage, boys. Comrade Trotsky is leading you behind!"



Rivals for power

STRUGGLE WITH STALIN

After Lenin's death, Trotsky and Stalin became rivals for power. Except for their fondness for aliases, the two men were utterly incompatible, Trotsky a high-strung, talkative intellectual and Stalin a stolid, quiet peasant. Stalin's technique was to let Trotsky talk, hoping he would put his foot in his mouth and choke to death.

Trotsky advocated world Communism, while Stalin favored concentrating on Russia. Unlike Trotsky, who had spent the best years of his life abroad, Stalin was a home-town boy with a narrow outlook. Large though it was, Russia wasn't big enough for the two of them.

When Lenin died, Trotsky was on vacation in the Caucasus, resting his vocal cords. On his return to Moscow he found himself ousted from his position as Commissar for War and

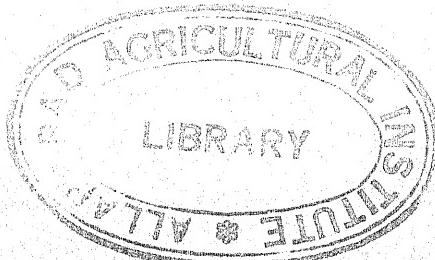
IT ALL STARTED WITH MARX

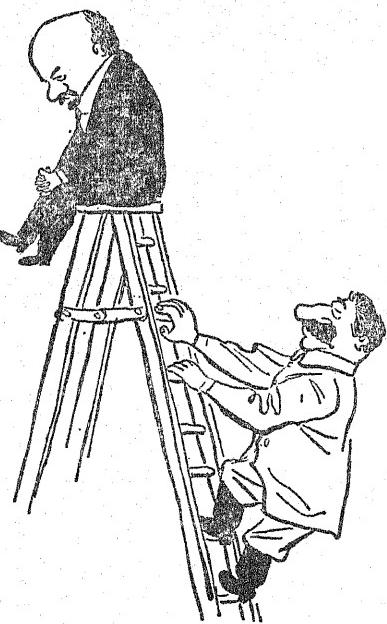
assigned to a small post connected with the development of electric power. He started on an inspection tour of electric stations, but it was a short circuit. Stalin banished him from Russia.

Trotsky went to Mexico by way of Turkestan, Constantinople, and Norway, either hoping to elude pursuers or mis-routed by an inexperienced clerk in a travel bureau. In Mexico he settled in a pleasant villa in Coyoacán, a suburb of Mexico City. There, idyllically surrounded by high concrete walls and machine-gun towers, he continued his work as the number one Trotskyite, day after day thumbing a thesaurus for suitable invectives to apply to the Stalinists.

On August 20, 1940, Trotsky was assassinated by a young man who said he was an admirer who had come to pick his brains, and proceeded to do so with a pickax. Although Stalin blamed the murder on a Mexican who was hopped up by tequila and full of jumping beans, it is noteworthy that he sent no flowers.

Trotsky is remembered by advocating "permanent revolution," wishing to keep revolutionists like himself constantly employed. Some believe that he was a purer Marxist than Stalin, and that, had he succeeded Lenin, things would have been different. They would have, for Trotsky.





THE RISE OF STALIN

IN VIEW OF his bloody career, it is appropriate that Stalin was born, on December 21, 1879, in a place called Gori. This "rock-strewn town" was situated in Georgia, fifty miles west of Tiflis and no telling how far east of Atlanta.

Stalin, born Joseph Vissarionovich Djugashvili, was affectionately called "Soso" by his mother, who frankly thought him only average. Following the precedent set by Lenin and Trotsky, he replaced Djugashvili with Stalin, meaning "steel." However, not even his closest friends ever referred to him as Stainless Stalin.

As a boy, Stalin worked for his father, a shoemaker. During his apprenticeship he learned some of the shrewd aphorisms which later gave color to his writings and speeches, such as

IT ALL STARTED WITH MARX

"Why try to lift yourself by your bootstraps when I would be glad to do it with a rope?"

But his mother decided on another way her son might save men's soles. She sent him first to a religious preparatory school and then to the seminary in Tiflis.

Although he stayed on for five years, to please his mother, he was secretly a member of the revolutionary underground. His double life was discovered when he was found in the library with a Bible on the table and a copy of *Das Kapital* in his lap, and he was expelled.

HE BECOMES A FULL-TIME REVOLUTIONIST

Fresh from the seminary, Stalin took up revolution as a career and joined the Bolsheviks. They thrust him into a responsible position at once, appointing him treasurer of the local branch. His duty was to rob a bank the first of each month, when there were bills to pay. His biggest armed robbery was in Tiflis in 1907, when he and the assistant treasurer shot up the town and brought a touch of the Far West to the Near East. Stalin's only advance over the technique of Jesse James was his trick of rolling bombs down the main street, which had a way of thinning out traffic and clearing a parking place in front of the bank.

People who came up against Stalin in those early days felt something cold about him, probably the muzzle of his revolver. He was emotionless and quiet—a man of few words, none of them pleasant. With his low forehead, uncombed hair, and unshaven face, he looked like a thug. His looks were not deceiving.

HUNTED BY THE POLICE

Stalin's activities were becoming known to the Czar, whose secret police could no longer keep the secret. Too many banks were being robbed, too many trains derailed. He ordered the police to tighten their net. They did, and to their surprise Stalin was in it, cleverly disguised as a butterfly.

RICHARD ARMOUR

No one knows how many times Stalin was arrested and imprisoned. Between 1903 and 1913 Stalin was exiled to Siberia six times, establishing a record never since equaled. They laughed, that first time at the Tiflis railway station when he insisted on a round-trip ticket, but after two or three trips issued it without question. He had several ingenious ways of escaping, one of which was to read aloud from Marx to his guards, slipping out as soon as they fell asleep.

His years spent in Siberia were actually a blessing to Stalin. As one biographer has said about the effects of Siberian exile, "The Czar, intent on the destruction of his enemies, only succeeded in setting them up, physically and mentally." Stalin was free to go hunting and fishing, get plenty of invigorating fresh air, and read volumes of subversive literature, all at government expense.

INFLUENCE OF LENIN

Stalin first met Lenin, who was nine years older, when he was twenty-six. Lenin's personal magnetism made itself felt at once, almost pulling the iron buttons off Stalin's blouse. Stalin in turn interested Lenin, who wondered how a man with such a low forehead could wear a hat. They shared a passion for chess and played game after game, Stalin always confident he could win the next one.

When the Revolution of 1917 broke out, Stalin was wintering in Siberia. He pulled up stakes (they had him tied down) and headed for Petrograd, where he joined Lenin and Trotsky. Like the latter, he had never worn a uniform, but he was immediately given command of an army, with rank equivalent to that of a full general. Later, having risen this far without Basic Training, he promoted himself to Generalissimo.

In the Bolshevik government under Lenin, Stalin became one of the five members of the Politburo, a group of courteous gentlemen who were always bowing to each other and trying to summon a smile. But Lenin and Trotsky made all the speeches and received all the plaudits, Stalin seeming content to puff

IT ALL STARTED WITH MARX

silently on his pipe in the background. He was biding his time.

Lenin had been in power only a few years when his health began to fail and he tottered on the brink. Trotsky suggests that Stalin, who hated to see anyone suffer, gave him a nudge.

In his last months, Lenin was increasingly offended by Stalin's table manners, objecting to the way he would reach clear across the table to sprinkle something in his borsch. This is why he wrote in his famous testament¹ that Stalin was "too rude" and should be removed from office. However, Stalin went right on having his picture taken with Lenin at every opportunity, even when it was necessary to prop him up to make him look alive. It is said that he had to guide Lenin's hand in inscribing the deathbed photo with its "To Stalin—My Buddy."

In 1924 Lenin passed on—whither, it is not within our province to conjecture. It was the moment Stalin had been waiting, hoping, and we almost said praying, for.

COMPLETE POWER

No one expected Stalin to succeed Lenin. After all, Lenin had left the man nothing but a few insults to remember him by. Moreover, there was always Trotsky, a dangerous rival who had incensed Stalin with his Pan-Russian proposals. Nobody, muttered Stalin, was going to pan Russia and get away with it.

Only those close to him, who noticed the widening gap between his trouser cuffs and his shoes, realized that Stalin was gaining stature. He had been appointed General Secretary of the Party, but instead of taking minutes he was taking hours to record nasty remarks and innuendoes which were later to prove invaluable.

Finally he showed his hand. Before long all of him was in plain view. He wasn't voted into power; he didn't seize power. He simply noticed that Lenin's chair was empty and sat down. Visitors to the Front Office noticed a new picture over Stalin's head, a picture of Stalin, smiling.

¹ Famous everywhere but in Russia, where it was not published until 1956, by which time it seemed a little dated.



THE STALIN ERA

LENIN HAD DREAMED of electrifying Russia. It was an odd dream, with power lines in a terrifying tangle, sparks leaping out of the ground, and peasants leaping straight into the air. He was always glad when his alarm clock awakened him.

Stalin tried his best to make Lenin's dream come true. His slogan was "Overtake America,"¹ and he set his scientists to work, offering Stalin Medals, Stalin Plaques, Stalin Scrolls, and generous benefits for scientists' widows.

PLANNING AND PRODUCTION

In order to achieve industrial progress, an Institute of Planning was established, and thousands of qualified planners were graduated. There was an increase in the production of production charts, and a rise in graphs.

To give workers something to shoot at (a privilege hitherto reserved for the secret police), Stalin inaugurated a series of Five-Year Plans. Everyone was given a five-year calendar. Out

¹ Ominous Note: switch the syllables in Overtake and see what you get.
210

IT ALL STARTED WITH MARX

of the Five-Year Plans came such economic innovations as the eight-day work week and the edible lunchbox.

The Five-Year Plans were a great success, five years coming to an end in precisely five years, just as had been predicted. Such accuracy in forecasting was hailed throughout Russia.

A boon to production was Stakhanovism, named after Alexei Stakhanov, an eager-beaver miner who reached his 1937 quota in 1935 and got everybody mixed up about what year it was.

Coincident with the Five-Year Plan was the Nine-Months' Plan, established to give everyone something to do. This was supervised by the Bureau of Procreation, in whose office were such signs as: "Have You Had a Baby This Year?" and "Cash Prizes for Twins."

To gain time, the State discouraged the folderol of courtship. Usually a boy and girl met while working side by side in the assembly line of, say, the Nizhnii Novgorod Nut and Bolt Works. During their ten minutes off for lunch they blushingly discussed production figures and after a few days exchanged monkey wrenches as a sign of their troth. The State benevolently gave them a change of scene for their honeymoon, permitting them to work in some other part of the factory.

HEAVY INDUSTRY

Always Stalin emphasized Heavy Industry. He wanted something that kleptomaniac factory workers couldn't pick up and take home with them. Industry became so heavy, in fact, that floors began to give way at an alarming rate, and it became necessary to build factories underground.

Some difficulty was occasioned by the fact that workers in factories, accustomed to sabotaging production under the Czar, found it hard to break the habit. Often they absent-mindedly slit power belts or threw sand into machinery, and were chagrined when they remembered that the factory belonged to the People. Some of the workers were none too clear about who the People were. Surely it couldn't be they. On second thought, they agreed that they may have been given the works.

RICHARD ARMOUR

AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENTS

Agriculture, meanwhile, was undergoing a profound change. This was the result of the *kolkhoz*, or Collective Farm, where peasants worked for everybody instead of themselves and whatever they produced was collected and carted off by the State. Everyone liked the system but the peasants. They were not forced into *kolkhozes*, however, but were given the choice of joining them or starving to death. Most of the *kulaks*, gentlemen farmers who looked suspiciously like capitalists, were carted away by the secret police for questioning. One question never answered was what happened to them.

Mechanization also changed the agricultural picture. Tractors became the most prized possession of the Russian peasant, though owned by the State. It was a common occurrence for a farmer to bring his tractor into the bedroom at night and to make his wife sleep in the barn. A woman could be divorced if she came between a man and his tractor. She could also be run over, a harrowing experience.

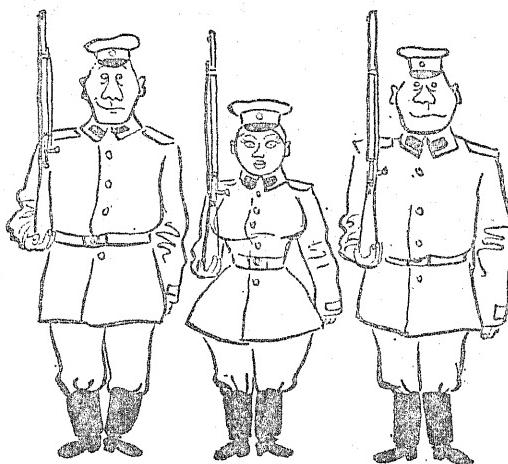
EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN

It must not be thought, however, that woman's place was always beneath the tractor. During Stalin's dictatorship women were emancipated, which means that they were now permitted to drive trucks, sweep streets, carry ice, fit sewer pipe. A new career open to them was the Army, and many learned to shoot a rifle, throw a hand grenade, and go A.W.O.L. Women who had been camp followers now became leaders.

EDUCATION

As for education, there was a rapid rise in literacy. Russian boys and girls became excellent spellers. This was a good thing, because they had to cope with words like Orjonikidze, Pobedonostsev, Kosmodemyanskaya, and Dnieprodzerzhinsk. To make it easier for Russian school children, histories of Russia were materially shortened by eliminating everything before 1917. They were also published in loose-leaf form to keep up

IT ALL STARTED WITH MARX



Women were emancipated

with swiftly changing past events. Interesting facts were being discovered almost daily, for example that Trotsky instead of being a First Class Hero was an enemy of the State.

Similarly, biology textbooks were published with two interchangeable chapters on the work of geneticist T. D. ("Touchdown") Lysenko. Which chapter was used depended on whether Lysenko, who was inclined to be forgetful, had paid his Party dues that month.

On the other hand, there was never any question about the findings of Professor Pavlov, the famous saliva man, who gave dogs schooling in drooling. His greatest scientific achievement was when he got dogs so confused that they imagined they were eating dinner whenever they heard a bell ring. Pavlov thus performed an outstanding service to the State by completely eliminating the need for dog food. But for his untimely death, in 1936, he might have done as much for humans.

RELIGION

In the field of religion, Marx and Lenin would have been proud of the achievements of Stalin. Under his leadership there was increased activity by the League of the Godless, the mem-

RICHARD ARMOUR

bers of which picketed churches with signs reading "Unfair to Organized Atheism" and "Leave the Church in the Lurch." They also placed a copy of *Das Kapital* on the bedside table in every hotel room in Russia, with a suggestion of passages to read when in trouble.¹

For people who wanted a place to go on Sundays there was the Anti-Religious Museum of Moscow, which featured no sermon and no collection plates. Why Russians continued to sneak off to church, with such a delightful alternative, Stalin could never understand.

THE PURGE TRIALS

In 1934, Sergei Kirov, a Communist leader in Leningrad, was foully murdered² by his secretary's husband, probably because Kirov was working her overtime. Kirov was a good friend of Stalin's and Stalin was incensed. He felt that if his best friends were to be murdered, he should at least be given first refusal. It left him strangely dissatisfied to walk in the funeral procession of a high Party official and realize that he had had no part in his demise.

So he instituted a new type of judicial process known as the Purge Trial, which he tried out on Zinoviev, Kamenev, and other Old Bolsheviks to be sure it would work. If the defendant refused to talk, the prosecutor had only to hold up a bottle and a spoon and the poor fellow would break down completely.

Sometimes Stalin could get what he wanted out of a discredited Bolshevik leader without a purge. There was, for instance, the case of Nikolai Bukharin, whose *A.B.C. of Communism* had established him as an authority on the alphabet. After a few sleepless nights, when he was kept awake by the noise of pistols being cocked, Bukharin confessed everything willingly. Later, having heard the confessions of some of his colleagues, he added a few gruesome episodes in order not to be thought a piker. He was finally carried away by his oratory and

¹ It helped to be reading them when seized by the secret police.

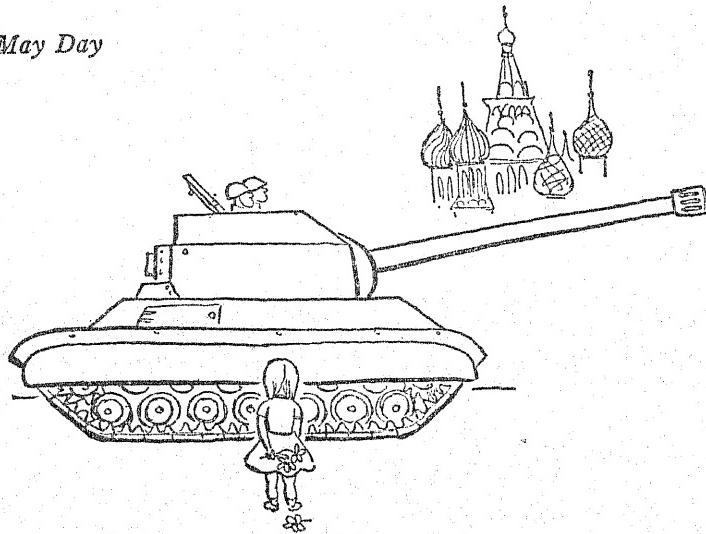
² Those who were murdered fairly never knew how lucky they were.

IT ALL STARTED WITH MARX

by two NKVD men. He had hoped to make the front pages of *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, but disappointingly was given only a brief notice in the obituary column.

The man in charge of these trials was Andrei ("Vicious") Vishinsky, later Foreign Minister and star of the United Nations television spectacular. Stalin gave him the position of Chief Public Prosecutor, and Vishinsky took the title seriously, working overtime at it. Vishinsky's most memorable words during

May Day



the Purge Trials were: "I demand that all these mad dogs be shot." Judges, most of them in mortal terror of rabies, acceded to his humanitarian request.

MINOR DEVELOPMENTS

One minor development was the Communist conception of May Day. On this springtime holiday everyone came to Moscow in a festive mood, eager to view the latest Weapons of Destruction. Breaking with sentimental tradition, those in charge requested that flowers be omitted, the money going instead for tanks, planes, and nerve gas.

RICHARD ARMOUR

Another interesting change was the unique way the names of cities were standardized, in the interest of simplicity. Whatever the ending, the first two syllables were the same, as in Stalingrad, Stalinbad, Stalino, Stalinir, Stalinsk, etc. To lend an air of gaiety, large pictures of Stalin were hung at each street corner and draped over the sides of buildings.

THE HITLER-STALIN PACT

The most striking event in international affairs came in 1939, when Stalin signed a nonaggression pact between Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany. It is interesting that Stalin, only two years before, had had thirteen of his closest friends shot because they sought an alliance with Germany. However, though he may have stolen their idea, he at least had the decency not to use it in their lifetime.

A famous photograph of the pact-signing shows Stalin shaking hands with Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, each with an inscrutable smile on his face. When Hitler, without declaring war, hurled his armies across the Soviet border, Stalin was chagrined, having had the same plan in mind for a slightly later date.

WORLD WAR II AND ITS AFTERMATH

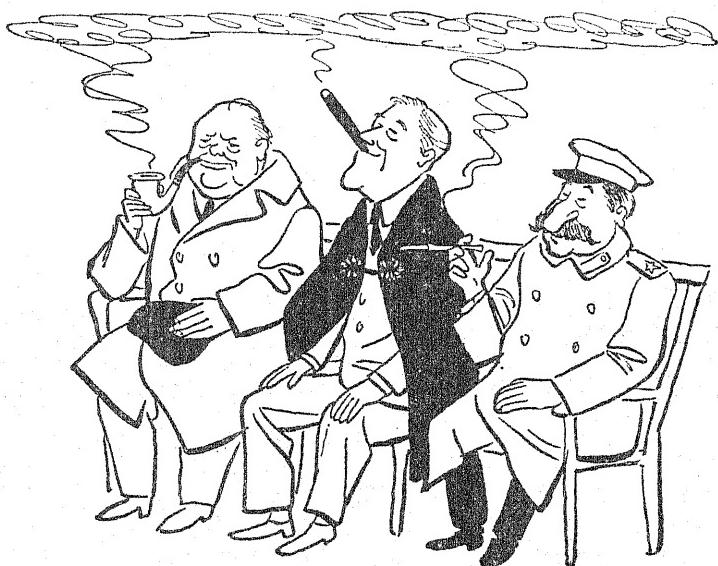
After first recoiling from Hitler's advances, the Red Army came into its own, which included Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Rumania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Albania, East Germany, and Poland. On August 8, 1945, Stalin brought the Soviet into the war with Japan and humbled the Mikado in less than a week, and without fighting. This was a considerable improvement over the nineteen months it took Russia to be defeated by Japan in 1904-05.

In the closing years of the war, Stalin met twice with Churchill and Roosevelt. Just as he felt he could hold his inscrutable smile no longer, the Allies tricked him by sending in a new team, Attlee and Truman. This pair was entirely different from

IT ALL STARTED WITH MARX

the first, Attlee not caring for cigars and Truman possessing neither a cape nor a cigarette holder. Stalin wondered who had assassinated those other fellows.

Little was accomplished, save that the American and British, though notoriously poor linguists, finally grasped the meaning of the Russian word, "Nyet!" At Potsdam, Stalin clapped for an orderly just as Truman finished playing "The Missouri Waltz," and instead of a drink got an encore.



Trying each other's smokes

At these sessions, so many toasts were proposed (and accepted) that drinking became a problem, although there were no problem drinkers. Churchill slyly soaked up his drinks in his cigar, Truman dumped his into the piano, and Stalin is thought to have had a small storage tank under his mustache. In one way or another the conferees managed to keep their eyes clear even when their intentions were not.

RICHARD ARMOUR

After the war it was assumed that Stalin would help his former allies keep the peace. He was affectionately called Uncle Joe by almost everyone, and the Kremlin became known as Uncle Joe's Cabin. But Stalin had not forgotten his pledge of allegiance to the hammer and sickle "and to the revolution for which it stands." It was not by accident that his agents could be spotted in the Trouble Spots of the world, ostensibly working as caviar salesmen.

THE SATELLITES

Russian rulers had always felt their country to be surrounded by enemies. Stalin hit upon a novel way to remedy this situation. By taking over all the adjoining countries, he would surround Russia with Russia! To achieve his goal, he first encouraged all the small nations bordering on Russia to elect Communist governments. One form of encouragement was to provide large numbers of Russian soldiers to help get out the vote. Also provided were trained ballot counters. There was nothing Stalin wouldn't do for a neighbor.

These countries became known as satellites and had puppet governments which kept the people entertained with Punch and Judy shows. One of the advantages of being a satellite was that there was a favorable balance of trade. Wheat, machinery, and dirty old factories could be palmed off on Russia in return for brand-new pictures of Stalin and autographed copies of his *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*.

COMMUNISM IN AMERICA AND ASIA

Stalin hoped, as had Lenin, to spread Communism throughout the world. In America his purpose was served by *The Daily Worker*, which carried on its masthead the motto: "All the news that fits, we print." It could reverse its position on an issue on twenty-four hours' notice. This maneuver became known as the flip-flop because the American editors flipped when a Russian policy flopped. The Communist Party in America was inexplicably led for some years by a titled gentleman, Earl Brow-

IT ALL STARTED WITH MARX

der. Histories of American Communism make frequent references to the Communist Front but remain discreetly silent about the Communist Behind.

In Asia someone coined the phrase, "Asia for the Asiatics." Signs reading "Down With Yankee Right Fielders" appeared in great numbers, and crowds in the streets shouted: "Amelican Malines, So Long." Stalin had set up sign factories and schools for demonstration directors from Peiping to Hong Kong.

In 1950, Stalin and the leader of Communist China, Mao Tse-tung (with tung in cheek), signed a thirty-year friendship pact, both of them politely refraining from any mention of Stalin's pact with Hitler in 1939. Stalin, who was in his seventy-first year, had reason to doubt that he would be around when the thirty years were up.

DEATH OF STALIN

On March 5, 1953, the Moscow radio announced that Stalin had died of a stroke. Those who had come to think of him as a god were forced to revise their thinking. There was a rumor that the radio reports were tardy and that Stalin had been dead for weeks. The reason for the delay was that the embalmer was having trouble making him look as good as Lenin. After all, if the two great men were to lie side by side in the mausoleum on Red Square, there should be no invidious comparisons.

At Stalin's funeral, speeches were made by the three top Party members, G. M. ("General Motors") Malenkov, L. P. ("Long Playing") Beria, and V. M. ("Vyacheslav Mikhailovich") Molotov. They remembered that Stalin had made the principal oration at Lenin's funeral, and had become head man. So they vied with each other to outpraise their deceased leader, hailing him as "the heir of Lenin" and "the interpreter of Marx."

The death of Stalin marked the end of an era and, even more conclusively, the end of Stalin. Lying in his tomb alongside Lenin, he could be sure of one final achievement. Those who waited patiently in line would now see a double feature.



AFTER STALIN

NO ONE EXPECTED Georgi Malenkov to succeed Stalin. How could a man only five feet seven who weighed over 250 pounds and was known by his friends as Fatovich lead Russia anywhere except to the dinner table? Would his speeches to underfed workers sound convincing? But stranger things have happened, although none comes to mind at the moment.

MALENKOV'S RISE

Little as the world knew about Malenkov in 1953, he had already made a place for himself in the Communist Party. His biographer says that he won his spurs as a Commissar on the Turkestan front during the Civil War. Having won his spurs, he was never without them, as Party work horses had good reason to know.

Malenkov was a protégé of Stalin's, becoming a member of his private secretariat and achieving a position of confidence (in his survival) during the 1937-38 purges. It was Malenkov whom Stalin asked to examine the lists of those about to be

IT ALL STARTED WITH MARX

purged, to see whether anyone had been slighted. What gave Malenkov real power was being managing director of ORPO, or in other (longer) words, Otdel Rukovodashchikh Partiinikh Organov. As such, he kept track of all the important Party members and reported directly to Stalin which ones were still alive and why. In this job he learned that the way to get ahead was not to have your name in the headlines but to keep it out of the obituary column.

So it was that, when Stalin died, Malenkov stepped into his shoes, which were still warm.

MALENKOV AS PREMIER

Malenkov at once proclaimed a policy of coexistence. He could see no reason why Communist Russia and what in a generous moment he called "the Fascist Barbarians of the West," could not live side by side, or even back to back. He also demanded a rise in consumer goods, especially foodstuffs, because now that he was Premier he really intended to stuff himself.

One casualty during Malenkov's premiership was Lavrenti P. Beria, Minister of the Interior. As his title suggests, it was his job to look inside of houses, desk drawers, personal letters, and people. He also was head of the secret police, and had only to snap his fingers or crack his knuckles and his men would jump out from the molding and do their grim duty.

Beria had been one of Malenkov's staunchest supporters, always at hand to prop up his friend after a heavy dinner. But, as one historian has said, "he knew too much." Malenkov couldn't stand having anyone around who was better informed than he. So Beria was relieved of his office, shot, and tried.

But Malenkov didn't last long as Premier. Within two years, on February 8, 1955, he appeared before the Supreme Soviet and made an eloquent speech, the gist of which was that he was completely disgusted with himself. The applause was deafening. He said his agricultural program had failed, there was a shortage of radishes, and his salad days were over. The standard

RICHARD ARMOUR

of living instead of rising had declined, and there was now an average of only 2.4 chairs per family. He was inexperienced, incompetent, and he hated himself. At this point his voice broke, and in the silence that ensued before it could be mended, his resignation was accepted.

Everyone expected Malenkov to be liquidated, in his case melted down for tallow. But someone had a brilliant idea. Why not make him Minister of Electric Power Stations and send him out to inspect high-voltage lines? This was done, and everyone laid in a supply of candles, expecting a temporary short circuit. Electrocution being more humane than shooting, it was obvious that the old days of the Czarist and Communist brutality were over.

COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

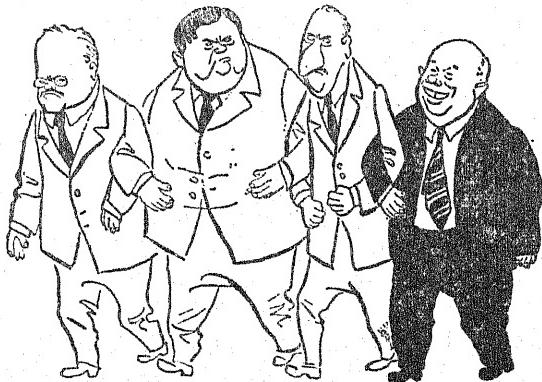
The governing body now came to have two heads. The first time people noticed it they thought they had been drinking too much. Nikolai Bulganin took over Malenkov's job as Premier and Nikita Khrushchev took over his job as Secretary of the Central Committee. By means of a new system called Collective Leadership or Share-the-Blame, the government was broadened to include Malenkov, Molotov, and Lazar Kaganovich. Thus when leaders were accused of bungling, they could simply shrug their shoulders and point at each other. It was only when an honor was to be bestowed that there was any difficulty.

Bulganin and Khrushchev, affectionately known as Bulge and Krutch, set off on a series of tours to China, Yugoslavia,¹ India, and England. Everywhere they went they talked with workers, which they did not do in Russia for fear of slowing down production. Once their facial muscles became accustomed to it, both men smiled broadly and incessantly and came to be known as Jolly Good Fellows. Khrushchev was the one who did most of the talking and most of the drinking, and the more he did of the latter the more he did of the former.

¹ Where Tito was blowing hot and cold, a feat which it was worth traveling a thousand miles to see.

IT ALL STARTED WITH MARX

At the Twentieth Party Congress, in February, 1956, Krushchev made a seven-hour speech which left his hearers amazed. He accused Stalin of despotism, greed, megalomania, incompetence, arrogance, and biting his fingernails. Khrushchev admitted that he should have revealed these facts years before, but he had been too polite to mention them while Stalin was alive and they had somehow slipped his mind for the past three years.



With a friend like Khrushchev, they didn't need any enemies

Thus came the end of the Cult of Personality and the beginning of a period of de-Stalinization. Every day people were to shrink their portraits of Stalin a little and whittle away at his statues until he was cut down to size. Battalions of sign painters were recruited to change names of streets and cities.

ONE BOSS AGAIN

But Collective Leadership died young. One Day Krushchev was walking down the street arm in arm with Malenkov, Molotov, and Kaganovich, chatting amiably. The next day he rose before the Central Committee and accused these Comrades of all manner of heinous crimes. "No man is too big for the Party," he snarled, looking straight at Malenkov, who was sitting on three chairs. Molotov and Kaganovich likewise came in for some uncomplimentary remarks, and might better have

RICHARD ARMOUR

remained outside. Obviously their friendship had paled, perhaps because of those months in the Kremlin with the blinds drawn.

Whatever the reason, the three men were dropped from their high offices, though not, like some satellite leaders, via their windows. Malenkov was sent to run a power station in East Kazakhstan, it being hoped that this time he really *would* stick his finger in a light socket. Molotov was made Ambassador to Mongolia, as a test case to see whether diplomatic immunity would afford any protection against yellow fever. Kaganovich was assigned to a cement factory in Sverdlovsk, Western Siberia, and was likely to be stuck there indefinitely.

Shortly afterward Marshal Zhukov, who had helped Khrushchev get rid of the others, was rewarded by being relieved of his onerous duties as Defense Minister and head of the Red Army. Those present when he learned of his reassignment to a desk job say that he wept tears of gratitude. As for Krushchev, he now felt free to revive the Cult of Personality, which had lost some of its former repulsiveness, and writers of history books wearily began revising their just-completed revisions.

AN UNEXPECTED TRIUMPH

One afternoon Khrushchev was sitting at his desk in the Kremlin, idly drawing Russian doodles. A man, claiming to be an inventor, had been trying for days to get an audience with the Party Chief. He had something of great urgency to tell him, and would disclose it to no one else. Finally Krushchev said to send him in, he would hear him out. (Some thought he said "heave him out.")

The inventor, a bald-headed little man named Stanislav V. Sputnik, put before Khrushchev a fantastic proposal. If Krushchev would give him the funds and two dozen German scientists, he could send a rocket to the moon and make it a satellite like Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

Khrushchev thought the man was off his rocker, but he desperately needed another satellite. There hadn't been a new

IT ALL STARTED WITH MARX

one since Syria. So he sent Sputnik to Ulrich von Hackenschmertz with a note that read: "Of course it's impossible. But if you and Sputnik hit the moon, I'll let you work in your laboratory without leg irons."

The rest is history. Sputnik and Hackenschmertz launched a missile for the moon. Through a miscalculation, or a power failure, it got up only a few hundred miles, then leveled off and began zooming crazily around the earth. When the bad news came to Khrushchev, who had been peering through binoculars at the moon for hours, he buried his face in his hands and sobbed. He should never have let that stupid Sputnik go ahead. Russian science would be the laughingstock of the world. "Somebody shoot the damned thing down, for the love of Lenin," he screamed. "And shoot the inventor too!"

Then a wonderful thing happened. Cablegrams of praise began to pour in. Every nation wanted a "Sputnik" of its own overhead, going around and around like mad and getting nowhere. By unbalancing its budget and straining every sinew, the United States after a couple of hectic months got a Sputnik into the sky, whizzing around in the approved manner. Soon country after country, from England to Liechtenstein, was plunging into debt to have a Sputnik it could call its very own.

Khrushchev, though at first incredulous, soon realized that by a brilliant decision he had achieved Communism's greatest victory. He summoned Comrade Sputnik, and none too soon. When Khrushchev's message arrived, the firing squad had already fired and the bullets were in mid-flight. A second later and they would have passed the point of no return. Sputnik was hurried to the Kremlin, still blindfolded and clutching his slide rule. There he was embraced by Khrushchev, who kissed him on both cheeks and made him a Folk Hero with Oak Leaf Cluster. While Sputnik stood there with a puzzled look on his face, still trying to figure out what had gone wrong with his calculations, Khrushchev pinned medals on him from his collar to his trouser cuffs.

Khrushchev was beside himself. Neither Lenin nor Stalin

RICHARD ARMOUR

had pulled off anything like this. Peasants and workers might not be eating any better, but they could look up into the sky and say, "It's ours, all ours." Khrushchev was shrewd enough not to tell them it belonged to the State, just as they did.

Though holding only the title of First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, Khrushchev was now unquestionably top dog.¹



And so we bring the story of Communism to the present, which is as far as we can safely go. By way of review, we remind the reader that Marx never did have much hope for Russia, that Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin have gone down in history under assumed names, and that Khrushchev rode to glory on a slight miscalculation in azimuth.

¹ Except for the one in *Sputnik II*. Soon afterward, when Bulganin left the government for a position in a bank, with shorter hours and longer life expectancy, Khrushchev became Premier.

Williamstown Branch

R. L. DUFFUS



AN ABRIDGEMENT

The Author

ROBERT LUTHER DUFFUS was born in Waterbury, Vermont in 1888. A graduate of Stanford University in 1910, he worked as a reporter, then editorial writer, for the *San Francisco Bulletin*, and later for the *San Francisco Call*. He joined the *New York Globe* in 1919, then went to the *New York Times* where he has been a member of the editorial staff since 1937. He is married and has three children and lives in Westport, Connecticut.

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH
R. L. Duffus
Published by
W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.
Copyright © 1958 by R. L. Duffus

CHAPTER ONE

I'm Sorry, Miss Fillmore

WE LIVED, when I was ten years old, in a house just outside of the village of Williamstown, Vermont, a house that had once been a tavern on the stage route which ran from White River Junction up the wild stream of the White River to the divide, and then down the grade to Barre, Montpelier, Burlington, and all the romance of the unvisited north country.

The house belonged to an elderly gentleman named George Ainsworth, who lived in one part of it while we rented the other part for, I believe, seven dollars a month.

Since I have refrained from studious research in libraries and am depending on the memories of a ten-year-old, carefully preserved somewhere inside the framework of a person infinitely older, I know nothing of Mr. Ainsworth's ancestry. I am convinced, however, that he had ancestors. How he came into possession of the General E. Bass house, which was where we lived, I cannot tell. Perhaps he married it. Gentlemen of prepossessing exteriors have often married thrones and fortunes. Why not houses?

Not that Mr. Ainsworth had the kind of smooth exterior that would have won him a fortune in a then nonexistent motion picture industry. He was not beautiful. Women could not have fallen at his feet, even when he was young. By the time I knew him he was bald-headed and offset this deficiency as many men did in those times by wearing a beard.

Mr. Ainsworth was a nervous man; there were then no fancy

R. L. DUFFUS

names for this infirmity. He was so nervous that he could not bear to have anybody sitting behind him in church—that is to say, the Congregational Church, which was the only one, according to his convictions, that was completely correct in its doctrines and administration.

So Mr. Ainsworth, belonging, as he was sure he did, to the only right church in Williamstown, sat in a special chair of his own in the rear left corner as you came in. My impression is that during services he tilted this chair back and enjoyed a solid comfort denied to those who were not too nervous to sit in pews. Mr. Ainsworth, from his rear chair, sang as loud as three choirs and as unmelodiously as a swamp full of bullfrogs in spring.

My father did not go to church at all, except on Easter, Christmas, and possibly Children's Day; he did not go to church in spite of the fact that he had met my mother while he sang in the Waterbury Congregational Church's choir. My father, sinful man that he was, sometimes went out in season to pick raspberries or blackberries on Sunday, or butternuts, or just for the exercise. He said that if God existed, and of this he never pretended to be sure, God was as likely to be up in Mr. Ainsworth's pasture as He was to be in the Congregational Church.

My poor father, as I now think. And, as I now also think, poor Mr. Ainsworth. In a way, they liked each other, and had some grand arguments. My father loved to tell of the evening they had a long set-to about the relative advantages of heaven and hell; my father said he didn't care to go to heaven if he had to meet the conditions laid down by Mr. Ainsworth and his friends, and Mr. Ainsworth replied, "Every man to his taste, Duffus, every man to his taste."

Mr. Ainsworth wouldn't have sent my father to hell if he could have done this by pressing a button. What he wanted was to win his argument, and on that occasion I think he did.

At all events, there was Mr. Ainsworth, living in a house that had once been important, in a village that might have been important if only the railroad had been built that way instead of by way of Northfield. Williamstown people had labored,

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

lobbied and sweated to get the railroad, but all they got was a branch line from Barre, and there was no glory in a branch line.

The old stage road was, in my early time, an affair of dirt, mud or dust, depending on the season. The stage coaches had disappeared, and so, as a through passageway, did the road. There was a sort of waiting period while somebody invented the automobile and somebody else invented the concrete-surfaced express way. We didn't plan to have this happen, and if we had been asked—as we were not—I am not sure we would have voted to have it happen.

The future couldn't be wiped out, not yet having arrived. Neither could the past, being dead and immortal.

The past was a room that Mr. Ainsworth had to own, in his capacity of owner of the house in which he lived and part of which he rented to us. Mr. Ainsworth was a pious man who didn't drink, dance, or chew tobacco. His wife had died a few years before my memories began, and therefore belonged with the ages. Mr. Ainsworth locked up a part of the house he didn't use and we didn't need. He locked up what I then thought of as mystery, but which I now know was history. We children saw it only once in a while, as he stood cautiously by with the key in his hand.

It was a fairly sizable hall, upstairs, on the eastern side, toward the hay barn; it had, I think, a broad-planked hardwood floor, perhaps of white pine or even oak; and it had a platform at the eastern end, with four or five steps leading up to it on each side.

This we knew, and perhaps we shuddered a little at the thought, must have been a place of mirth when our house was a tavern on the old stage route. There wasn't any such mirth among steady, church-going people in Williamstown in my day. Some of the wilder young folks danced, but not the very good of any age. Sometimes I wished I were bad, and could enjoy life to the full; but as a rule I felt safer being good.

However, the musicians must have sat on that platform, playing fiddles and other sinful instruments. I can see them now—

R. L. DUFFUS

in my mind's eye, if not my memory's—and the light-minded and light-footed people of Williamstown, and the passengers from the coaches that passed through, must have danced to their fiddling.

Who came through, in what stage coaches and what chaises, riding what horses, bound from where to where? I wondered about this then, and I wonder about it, with a greater store of worldly knowledge if not more wisdom, now. I see now, and perhaps I confusedly felt then, that something lovely may have passed that way—something wicked, too, something of the joy and fierceness of life that later generations tried to exclude.

But I never could have imagined Miss Fillmore, the school mistress, dancing there, in the wildness of her lost youth, and then being whirled off to an unknown, a beautiful, a tragic destination.

The General E. Bass House, as it was called even after George Ainsworth owned it, was within easy running distance of the center of town. Let's say a mile in boy language, a quarter of a mile today. The center of town was the school house, the town hall, three churches, J. K. Linton's general store and postoffice, two drugstores, Seaver's drygoods store, the hotel, the livery stable, a blacksmith shop, the railroad station, the feed store, the creamery, and a sprinkling of residences. A little further along, and to the right as you sprinted up from where we lived, were the granite-cutting sheds—the stonesheds, as we called them—in which my father and some hundreds of other fathers, mostly Scottish, Italian, and French Canadian, spent six days a week cutting or otherwise handling granite.

Houses were places in which to live, but I think many homes in Williamstown were also beautiful; I think the General E. Bass house was such, with its simple design of a colonial or early republican front facing the road, and a wing behind.

Such a house was not cluttered by machinery of any kind. It was heated, if this word is correct, by a series of coal stoves; it was lighted by kerosene lamps; all its drinking water had to be brought from outdoors, although washing water, with an

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

occasional modest and self-effacing white worm in it, could be had at the kitchen pump inside; its privy was reached by walking out through the woodshed, which was much better than wading through snow or dashing through the rain to the older-fashioned, really outdoors variety; its bathing facilities were a wash-tub luxuriously placed, in winter, in front of the kitchen stove.

Mr. Ainsworth washed his face and hands every fine morning in a tub of rain water under an eavespout just outside my bedroom window, spluttering like a whale coming up from a mile-deep dive. He thought this did him good, and I don't doubt it did.

The electric light, the telephone, and the natural ice refrigerator had been invented, and the automobile was just around the corner; but we didn't have any.

If we had been rich we would have had a horse. I always wanted a horse. Once I was a good boy for nearly a year, under the impression that I might thus deserve a horse, a riding horse; I believed then that being good was tangibly rewarded. But good though I was for limited periods, and the period of which I am now writing was not one of them, we did not have a horse.

2

The day Miss Fillmore lost her pants was in January, 1898. I approach this date with misgivings, for it is hard now to realize that anybody was alive that long ago. Yet the biological fact is that somebody must have been alive then or nobody would be alive now; and I can prove, if required, that one of those who actually were alive was me.

In some ways the year 1898 had its advantages. I could see veterans of the Civil War walking around at their daily businesses, or parading with big flags on Memorial Day, just as though they were not embalmed in history. My maternal grandmother, the one who lived in Waterbury and the only one I knew, could have talked with someone who had talked with George Washington.

R. L. DUFFUS

Some persons, also, were young in 1898, although it did not occur to them in my part of the country to start a youth movement, or proclaim themselves a lost generation, or look back with anger.

On the morning of the day Miss Fillmore lost her pants, I woke to a sense of winter and a disinclination to get up. It was not so much that I minded *being* up, even though school would be in session that day; it was *getting* up that I minded.

The thermometer on this particular morning might have been a little above zero, or a little below, or quite a lot below. A really good thermometer in Williamstown, which was about a thousand feet above sea level, could get to twenty below without straining itself.

There was snow outside the day Miss Fillmore lost her pants. I suppose this was the reason that though they did have ruffles they were made of flannel—cream-colored flannel, as I remember. Nobody thought it wrong for snow to be outside in January, and on the other hand nobody had any money invested in the idea, as they did later when skiing came to Vermont.

When it was cold enough, as it was on this particular morning, we three children—my older brother, my younger sister, and myself—were allowed to gather up our clothing and make a shivering dash for the kitchen, where we could dress by the stove. Somehow my mother managed to cook our breakfasts while we were doing this. She had already made my father's breakfast and fixed his lunch in his dinner-pail, and he had gone off to the stonesheds.

This was at seven o'clock in the morning. Employers at that time were extremely solicitous about their employees, and believed that it was better for the worker's character to be on the job at least sixty hours a week.

In the General E. Bass house, in January, 1898, we had, beside the kitchen stove, a stove in the sitting room, and perhaps a stove, not always kept going, in the upstairs bedroom. The kitchen stove was, of course, kept in commission all the year round. The others were put up and taken down, with their con-

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

necting pipes, at the proper seasons. I suppose some of my adult command of language comes from listening to my father when a stovepipe would unjoint itself when he was taking it down and let the soot get into his eyes and down the back of his neck.

The kitchen stove was like any kitchen stove of its time, with perhaps two very hot griddles, two lukewarm griddles, and a water tank or "reservoir," as we called it, at the back. We burned anthracite coal and let the fires die down at night, banking them over with ashes. It might, I judge, take an hour to get the kitchen stove going well in the morning. The sitting room or parlor stove was such a slow starter that by the time it had got the room comfortably warm, the hour had come to choke if off for the night.

My mother was a good cook, although she did not have to be to get us children to eat. It was a Vermont custom for a person of any age to eat what was placed before him, and to eat all that was placed before him; this rule applied especially to the young. We had our preferences, but we were not supposed to actively dislike any food offered us.

Over quite a number of years, we had oatmeal, farina in various forms, Grape Nuts, and other pre-cooked breakfast foods, then just bursting on an astonished world (it was believed that if you ate too many Grape Nuts you really would swell up and burst), fried salt pork rather than bacon, toast, muffins, rolls, doughnuts, popovers (these my Aunt Alice in Waterbury made in a form never since equalled), griddle cakes, either wheat or buckwheat, with maple syrup, fried corn meal, eggs in various forms, and fruits—apples, apple sauce, dried prunes, dried apricots, preserves of various sorts, and once in a while, though usually not for breakfast, plums or berries put up at home. We had bananas occasionally and oranges at Christmas and New Year's, but not very often at other times, and then never for breakfast. I can't recall that we ever had orange juice.

I have probably left some things out. We did not have pie

R. L. DUFFUS

or beefsteak for breakfast, but we didn't come anywhere near starving. The people who did have pie and beefsteak for breakfast were farmers, who by breakfast time had already done as much work, out around the barns, as most city people then or now do in a week.

But I must not forget Miss Fillmore's pants, which, even at the moment of which I write, she may have been taking out of a bureau drawer in which dried rose leaves had been strewn.

Our ways were about to cross, as my brother, sister, and I sat in the warm, pleasant kitchen of the General E. Bass House on this winter morning in January, 1898. The kitchen got especially warm and pleasant when it was time to go to school. For this we put on more clothes: leggings or felt stockings with rubber shoes buckled over them; a reefer, or short overcoat; a woolen muffler; some kind of knit headgear.

We did not especially mind going to school, my brother and I. (My sister was too young at this time, or it may have been after her illness which lasted so long and scared us all so much.) For one thing, school was where our friends were, and we would have been lonely without them. School enclosed our small social life. It made us feel wanted, and secure.

We were lucky in one respect, or so we thought, during our school days in Williamstown. The Williamstown school board always felt poor, and judged that twenty-eight weeks of school a year was all it could afford. We therefore had plenty of vacations, which we couldn't have had if there had been no school, because there is no use in a vacation if it is not a vacation from something; and we couldn't have had them in such abundance if the town had been more extravagant in its educational largess.

The school, which still stands, with some additions and after-thoughts, was of the early Grover Cleveland type: a box with windows and doors. Like our homes, it lacked plumbing. Drinking water was carried in a brown composition pail from, I believe, a nearby house. In the pail was a dipper. On the edge of the dipper, as I now know, were the micro-organisms that

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

produce most of the diseases that children were accustomed to have—and were, indeed, almost encouraged to have—at that date.

My brother and I had almost none of them, and my sister didn't have all of them, though she did her best; but this was because our parents didn't believe that it was wise to have them and get them over with. When an epidemic of scarlet fever was running around town we stayed out of school. The result was that my brother and I had measles when we were in college, and I had mumps when I was working on a San Francisco newspaper and interested in other and higher things. On the other hand, if our parents had been of the democratic sort who believed that all children had a right to have all available children's diseases, we might not be here now.

Some of the young friends of those days have remained forever young: names carved on granite markers in the cemetery. I think of Richard Linton, son of a brother of the proprietor of the village store.

I also think of Archie Staples. Archie and I were friends, as I hope, but once in a while he would prove that he could out-wrestle me. I presume he could have outslugged me, too. Archie got some ailment that reduced him to sitting, wrapped in a blanket, outdoors in front of the Staples' farmhouse in July; and then he, too, died.

I have no doubt Richard and Archie could have been saved by a miracle drug, if such had been handy. They might have done something in the world.

3

On this January day, 1898, school was keeping, and there were no known epidemic diseases as an excuse for staying home. So my brother and I stepped out into the snow in the front yard of the General E. Bass house.

Across the road was a row of maple trees. Behind these, to the right, was the Sibley house, a brick structure with pendant barns. A little girl lived there, and this little girl figured pleas-

R. L. DUFFUS

antly in my thoughts, then and later. On our side of the road, to the right, was a barn—one of two on the place; the other was back under the lee of the hill. The front barn had some value, even though Mr. Ainsworth no longer worked the farm; he could get a dollar or two or a circus ticket or two by letting somebody paint or affix an advertisement where passersby could see it.

The rear barn was still used to store hay, which I presume Mr. Ainsworth sold as opportunity offered. My brother and I used to jump into the hay loft from the high platform in the center of the barn. This did us good, or so we thought; but as I learned later, from Mr. Ainsworth, it was not good for the hay.

Back of the rear barn was a hill which rose rather steeply for a few hundred feet. At one side, nearest the house, was a small gorge through which tumbled or trickled our branch of Stevens Brook. It was frozen now, and you could not hear its voice; but as it flowed it went into the Winooski, then into Lake Champlain, then into the Richelieu, then into the St. Lawrence, where all men and all waters spoke French and life was romantic, and finally into the North Atlantic Ocean.

I sometimes looked at our brook with envy. It went where I would have liked to go.

Across the road, behind the Sibley house and barns, were other and somewhat lower hills. They rose, beyond the immediate foreground, to sufficient heights to form the watershed that separated us from Northfield and from the main line of the Central Vermont Railroad.

To go to school we turned right and trotted the quarter mile or so to the Pool Bridge, crossed it, and then, a little further on, turned left off the road. The Pool Bridge spanned our brook, which had taken a loop through Mr. Sibley's meadow, found the going not quite satisfactory, and slid around again toward the base of the East Hill. A brook, like a boy, kept trying one plan after another, and had its whims and no logic behind them.

My brother and I took our sleds with us, as an old man might take his cane or a stylish young man his gloves. They

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

were, in a way, part of our winter costumes. Not to have a sled along was to be, or seem, undressed and impoverished. These sleds were low-slung. You lay flat and steered with your weight or with your toes. If you steered too much with your toes you not only showed a lack of skill, but you also wore out your shoes or rubbers, and this led to a paternal discussion.

Girls were not exposed to this temptation. How could a girl go, as we used to say, belly-bump? Girls, in that epoch, didn't have bellies. Girls sat up on tall sleds, and steered with a sort of rudder, squealing with a mixture of joy and, as I now think, pretended fear as they slid at possibly two miles an hour down slight declivities. This was long before the modern girl was invented. That came later: after the first World War, I believe.

I haven't the least doubt that almost any of these girls could have taken the Nose Dive on Mansfield without a quiver, if they had been expected to do so and had had six weeks' preliminary ski training. But they had been taught to believe that being timid, or seeming to be timid, made them more marriageable; and since that was the game, they played it.

I did not figure this out at that time, however.

I didn't figure out much at all about girls. In Williamstown in 1898 a boy was considered effeminate if he had too much to do with girls. On the other hand, there were mixed Sunday School classes, which went on mixed picnics, and sometimes there were mixed birthday parties, and the beginnings of pairing off.

I was a shy boy. Girls scared me. But I was the more reconciled to be going to school this morning because Millicent Byrnes, a wild and lovely Gaelic type whose memory hasn't left me all these years, was going to be there. One day, not long before, Millicent had abandoned her tall sled at the schoolhouse and asked me to take her for a ride on my own sled.

But girls at school flocked by themselves during recesses, and very often before and after school. Except when I drew Millicent on my sled on that one memorable day, I don't think I ever walked home from school with a girl.

Boys had their own austere lives at school in Williamstown in

R. L. DUFFUS

January, 1898. They built snow forts and fought desperate battles. Some among us considered it ethical to dip snowballs in water the night before, and let them freeze before using them, but most of us didn't do this; and I don't recall that any of us were ever seriously mangled in these conflicts. I remember once capturing a snow fort under heavy fire. At least that was what I claimed. The enemy argued that I was either dead or a prisoner.

Some of us—fortunately for the safety of the Republic, not me—fought in real wars later, and found that these points did not have to be debated.

At times we went wild. Maybe it was on this January day, the day on which Miss Fillmore lost her pants, that I and others ran all over the school yard in the snow with our rubbers off, and I, at least, caught a terrific cold. Maybe it was this day that I climbed on the railing of the little balcony and tied up the bell cord by which the teacher, that is to say, Miss Fillmore, called us in from recess. This gave my classmates ten extra minutes of leisure, but perhaps it was one more of the events leading inexorably to the ultimate tragedy—for such I am convinced the thing that happened was.

4

Our teachers changed frequently because, as I now see, nobody could make a career out of teaching in that school.

One young man taught us for a term or two in order to make enough money to go to divinity school. I don't know what happened to him afterward, but he learned about sinners—a certain kind of sinner—from us.

Not that we were in any way vicious. I often marvel at our essential goodness—not my own goodness, but the fairly high morality of the group. Mr. Balfour was never unkind or cruel; he was dourly good. He had patience but no humor, conscience but no clear idea as to what conscience was for. He honestly, and sadly, tried to educate us.

Another teacher was Mrs. Frankum, not young but still giving evidence of the warmth and charm that must have attracted

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

the late Mr. Frankum. Mrs. Frankum had humor. She understood small boys—and, I suppose, small girls as well. I think she left her mark for good on every child who came under her care in that school, and in any other school in which she ever taught.

Her gift to my brother and myself was to stir our ambitions. It was fatally easy in Williamstown at the turn of the century for a boy to apprentice himself to the deadly trade of granite-cutting, which took intelligence but not much academic education. Mrs. Frankum said fiddlesticks to any such proposal for us—and I imagine for most Williamstown boys she knew. She thought, and said, we ought to go to college.

We did, in fact, go to college, my brother and myself. It was impossible, by any reasonable standards, to do this, but—which is another story—we did. Williamstown could help us only just so far, for it had no high school.

I recall, over all the years, a dream I had in Mrs. Frankum's time. In the dream the familiar two-story school building had grown into a building of countless stories, reaching up toward the clouds. In doing this it had kept all its original characteristics. Each story represented a new step in education, and at the top was college. My brother and I were up there, in my dream, attending college.

I wish I could tell Mrs. Frankum how much we thought of her. Let the words I can't say to her go to other teachers, including some I never met.

But even Mrs. Frankum couldn't work miracles. Why do some ambitions, within limits and usually not in the form first projected and imagined—why do some of them work out, and others, just as real and shining, fail? It was while Mrs. Frankum was teaching us, I believe, that we were asked to write down the number of books each of us had read. My brother could remember two hundred or so, and so could I. And so also could Jim Nutting—whose real name I don't use here. Jim had a good mind and just as much interest in the world of books and of thought as we had.

The last I heard of Jim, years and years ago, was that he had

R. L. DUFFUS

been working as a brakeman on the Central Vermont Railroad. He had slipped while coupling cars by hand, in the old wicked way, and had lost a leg. He wanted as much as any of us, and that was what he got.

While I am still talking about school teachers, I must say a word or two about one whose name I do not remember, whose teaching left on me an aesthetic rather than an intellectual mark. This pretty young woman used to stand in front of the roomful of children, at the beginning of each session, and tie her apron. She made a careful knot in the fresh white fabric. She did this by tying a bow in front and then switching it neatly around to the small of her back. Then she smiled back at us, and there wasn't anything within reason that we boys, at least, wouldn't have done to please her. However, she did not, unlike Mrs. Frankum, make us want to go to college; she made us want to stay in the seventh grade, or whatever grade it was she was teaching.

It was altogether a pure and unselfish love we boys felt for that teacher (or so we thought until we grew up and read modern psychology); I have wondered since then if in later years we did not in some instances fall in love with women of approximately our own age who resembled her; if we had not, in a sense, acquired a teacher fixation.

Still another young woman teacher lingers with an unforgettable pathos in my mind and heart. I do not know how to explain what I am about to say, but the reason we did not let ourselves fall in love with her, however purely, was that everybody knew she belonged to Willie Stone. Willie Stone, a neat and cheery young man of about this teacher's own age—I may as well call her Miss Miller—worked in J. K. Linton's store. If there had been a popularity contest I suppose he would have won it. There wasn't anybody in town who didn't like Willie Stone.

Even boys liked Willie Stone, who never pretended to be old and wise just because he had passed twenty-one. Boys skylarking around a country store could be troublesome to a clerk, who had no authority, yet was expected to keep the stock in good

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

shape. Willie could do that without making enemies. I stole a chocolate once out of the candy counter, carelessly left open—one of the big one-cent chocolates. If Willie saw me, as I have since believed he did, he said nothing. He merely sauntered purposefully back to that end of the store and closed the sliding glass cover that protected the remaining chocolates.

For some reason this larceny never worried me. On the contrary, I felt rather proud of it. Still, I would return that chocolate if I could; I can't, because the store was long ago turned into a cooperative, and after that, burned down. In its place is a filling station, and I don't imagine the present proprietor would understand if I gave him a chocolate.

Willie Stone was then living at home, in a house that bordered on the schoolyard. He must have been living with his father and mother, though of them I have no present memory. Miss Miller, a lovely, pink, full-blooming blonde, full of sweetness and the laughing joy of life, lived a few miles out of town on a farm, over the hill, and it was inconvenient for her to go back and forth every day. So she roomed and boarded with the Stones. That was the way she and Willie met, and more than one young man about town must have envied Willie's opportunities.

But nobody, not even the young men who hung around the livery stable, made jeering remarks about Willie and Miss Miller. They wouldn't have dared make remarks about Miss Miller in such a way that Willie would hear of them. They wouldn't have wanted to, not even the young men who hung around the livery stable, ripe with derision and obscenities.

This was true romance, the love of Willie Stone for Jessamine Miller, the love of Jessamine Miller for Willie Stone. It was a thing beautiful to watch, and full of goodness, as even the children in Miss Miller's classes knew. Willie and Jessamine were going to be married in the spring.

I don't know how Jessamine got to and fro. Perhaps her father brought her on Monday morning and returned for her on Friday afternoon. At any rate, it was a horse-and-buggy trip, and would have taken an hour or more.

R. L. DUFFUS

Willie wasn't able to go for her on Monday morning, because he had to open the store. He wasn't able to take her home on Friday, because Friday was a big night at the store, and Saturday even bigger. So Willie, being duly engaged to Jessamine, got a rig at the livery stable and drove out to the Miller farm every Sunday. He probably paid little or nothing for the rig, since his employer also owned the livery stable. He would stay as late as the parental Millers would let him and then drive back. Since he had to get up early six mornings in the week, and since the horse he drove was sure-footed, Willie formed the habit of tying the reins around his shoulders and dozing during the drive home.

One Sunday night a farmer living between the Miller place and Williamstown heard the swift passing clatter of hoofs and wheels, and then something moaning near his door, beside the road. He did not open it for some time. He believed somebody was drunk and he did not believe in drunkenness.

It was, however, Willie Stone. How the accident happened Willie was never able to explain. The way of it, most people thought, was that Willie had gone too sound asleep after saying good-bye to Jessamine; the buggy had hit a ridge of rock in the road; the horse had taken alarm and started to run, and Willie had been thrown forward under the wheels. He might have escaped with slight injuries, but he became entangled in the reins.

Dr. Watson did all he could for Willie Stone, and that was as much as any doctor in Vermont could have done at that time. But infections set in, and the torn flesh and broken bones wouldn't mend.

Willie lay in his bedroom in the Stone house for a long, terrible week, with the curtains drawn and the doctor coming and going every hour or so. I marvel now at Jessamine Miller, for she taught school all that week. We went up to the front row of desks and recited our lessons, then went back and studied, or pretended to, while another group came up. Miss Miller gently asked her questions, as her way was, and told us when we were wrong, or called on somebody else to correct us.

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

One day, just before recess, she asked us to play as quietly as we could, so as not to disturb Willie. We did play quietly, too. The shades in the Stone house stayed drawn. Miss Miller went over during recess and at noon and after school. We went soberly home, not yelling until we were well away from the schoolhouse. We didn't argue or fight, not while Willie Stone was arguing so hard and deliriously for life and love.

The next morning, I think it was, Miss Miller said the prayer and read the Scripture with which school opened in that mainly Protestant community. We didn't notice any change in her manner. We wouldn't have, under any circumstances: a teacher was a teacher, and we were too young to imagine what, or whom, she might be thinking about when she wasn't teaching.

But she paused at the end of the Bible reading, and we sat still and looked at her, because at last we sensed, I think, her trouble.

"Willie has just died," she said. Those were her very words, remembered after all the years.

Then she called the first class that was to come forward and recite. She didn't cry, or I would have remembered that, too. And I know why. Underneath her lovely femininity, her tenderness, her lost hopes, there was a consciousness of obligation. She had taken the school board's silver dollars to teach us, and though Willie Stone was dead she would do what she had undertaken to do.

I hope she was happy afterward. I don't know. I believe she left at the end of the term.

5

The case of Miss Fillmore was different—whether more tragic or less tragic I don't know.

She had come from out of town, from Waitsfield as I recall, or perhaps Randolph. This was, at any rate, too far away, as distances went then, for her to go back and forth on weekends. She stayed in Williamstown, boarded at Miss Jenkins' place, went to the Congregational Church, and didn't have any beau.

R. L. DUFFUS

She may have been young and tremulous, but to us boys, and to some of the fun-loving characters who hung around the livery stable, she seemed an old maid. I wonder now, was she in her late twenties, or was it her early thirties? Was it her fault that she was unmarried at her age, whatever it was, or was the offence, rather, that nature had not made her pretty or physically warm toward men? I cannot make an image of her across the wilderness of years.

I don't know about Miss Fillmore. I never will know. I just feel guilty about her, for I sometimes imagine that it was I who gave her the final dagger stroke. I didn't mean to—but now I realize how little good this lack of evil intentions did Miss Fillmore.

I now assume that she was shy, and frightfully lonesome. I seem to know that she was teaching to earn money for some extraordinarily good purpose—not for her own delight, I imagine, but to help her parents or to send a younger brother or sister to high school or college. Let us imagine her moving in the friendly but possibly stiff society of Williamstown, going to church, attending church sociables and oyster suppers, looking wistfully for something—or someone—to happen.

We were not a vicious community. We didn't mean to be cruel. But every village, then as now, had its loafers; and ours tended to hang around the livery stable. They didn't work there. They didn't work anywhere, as long as they could help it. The loafers just hung around; they liked to sit around in the sun in summer, or around the warm stove in the so-called office in winter, and consider the facts of life. And their code, such as it was, did not bind them not to talk about women.

I don't believe they talked much about respectable middle-aged married ladies. You couldn't and wouldn't, not even in a livery stable, in 1898, in Vermont, not even if you were a livery stable loafer and never worked when you could help it. For one thing, a woman who had been married ten years, who was up in her middle thirties and had children, didn't then suggest ro-

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

mance, not to say scandal. A well-preserved widow might be interesting to the gossips, but these were scarce.

Most interesting of all, of course, were the young women who had a warmth, an allure, a figure, a way of walking, a voice, a glint in the eye, they could not or would not conceal or moderate. The livery stable had these girls classified, and when they went by, or even when they didn't go by, it talked about them. Anatomy was a livery stable specialty.

The livery stable boys talked, and it was clear by later events that they talked about Miss Fillmore. They talked about her for reasons just opposite from the ones that led them to speculate about a high-bosomed, swinging-gaited, ruddy-cheeked farmer's daughter of nineteen. They talked about her not because they judged she was having a romance or could have one, but because it was their opinion she could not and would not have a romance.

She could not have been of much interest to them, even so, until the day she lost her drawers. It was that event that brought her, in all her pathetic maidenhood, to the livery stable's attention.

Why Miss Fillmore lost her pants I can't clearly say, since I do not understand how women's drawers at that time were attached. My own dourly masculine apparel included what we called a waist, to which was buttoned whatever other under-wear we wore. The union suit either had not been invented, or we did not know about it, or it was considered too advanced for us; when it was finally, and with a triumphant flourish, placed on the market, many persons thought civilization had reached its golden age.

Women did wear drawers, however, in January, 1898. Nobody saw these drawers, except, perhaps, their husbands, if they had husbands; but if a woman had a pair of drawers with lace on them I imagined she felt delicate and refined. And Miss Fillmore's drawers did have lace on them; I saw them and can so testify.

R. L. DUFFUS

was hungry, and I came up in the early darkness and started for home.

My father was coming toward me, anger in his bearing. I shrank back, for I had reason to believe he could be angry at me. But he wasn't; he was on his way to the schoolroom to have it out with Miss Fillmore if she was still keeping me after school. He was a stern-spoken Scot, who knew his rights; he would have kept within the limits of politeness to a woman, but I am glad for her sake and everybody's sake who was concerned, that he did not have to rescue me.

We went the short distance home together. He was kind with me, and I felt more like a sinner than ever.

The next day the news was all over town that Miss Fillmore had lost not only her pants, but her temper, and had nearly choked the younger Duffus boy. The day after that the news was all over town, and this was much more exciting, that Miss Fillmore had received at her boarding house a carefully wrapped package tied in blue ribbon, containing a new pair of women's drawers. This had come from the boys at the livery stable.

Miss Fillmore finished out the term, which was near its end. I don't know how she did it. I think we even had the customary last-day-of-school exercises, to which parents and other relatives came.

Then Miss Fillmore went back to wherever she came from, and did not return for the spring term. I wonder if the livery stable boys would have sent that pair of drawers if word hadn't got around that she had been rough with the younger Duffus boy.

I'm sorry, Miss Fillmore, I didn't mean to.

The snowstorm had been followed by an absolute clearing. Every snow particle glistened in the morning sun, against the blackness of trunks of trees, against the whiteness of birch,

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

against the black and gray of rocks. I went up, alone, on the left of the falls, where tumbled masses of ice retained the effect of flowing water. I seemed to have to get over the edge of the hill and not see the familiar warm outlines of the place where I lived, any more, nor the village with its roofs and steeples. I wanted to be desolate in a white wilderness, in the untraveled Arctic, perhaps.

I came over the ridge to a place beside the brook which was well-known and friendly to me. Now it was strange, but not unfriendly. Now in this year so long after, I shut my eyes and I see a long slope and above it, because of the wind that still blows, and no doubt will blow forever, long after the time of man—and the time of ten-year-old boys—a drift curled over toward the brook, ready to fall. Because a boy is destructive and experimental, I climb up a few feet and send this beautiful wavering blade of snow down the slope.

Something inside me says, I suppose, nature will know I have been here now, she will have to rebuild that crest of snow and do that beauty all over again.

It is lovely here, and too lonely, perhaps, and I am a little frightened. Perhaps I ought not to have interfered. Perhaps I was not meant to be here today, perhaps I was not invited.

I retrace my steps. It is not far. I see again the spires of the churches and the houses in the village, and then the house where I belong, with its chimney smoking and dinner cooking.



CHAPTER TWO

The Stingiest Man

ICANNOT speak for the other two Duffus children, my older brother and my younger sister; but I myself could not be called devout and I don't recall that the others were, either. We liked church suppers, whether they provided baked beans, oyster stews, or maple sugar on snow, with pickles and doughnuts; we liked anything good to eat; we also liked sociability within certain limits.

For this reason I think we, all of us, at one time or another, went to the Wednesday evening prayer meeting with my mother. Once we even had a religious cat, which followed my mother to church and up the stairs to the Sunday School room, where the prayer meeting was held, and sat on her lap, purring loudly, throughout the service. This must have been during the Reverend Blake's time, because the Reverend Jasper Pell, the old war horse who followed Mr. Blake, would have regarded the presence of a cat as sacrilegious.

But Mr. Blake, as I am sure it was, stopped and petted the cat as he came down the aisle after saying the benediction. "That's a good Congregational mouser," he said.

My mother was reassured. "Of course," she protested, "I didn't know he was following me."

This was a pleasant incident, but things were always happening at prayer meeting. Once in a while somebody would start to, as we said, get religion; but neither Mr. Blake nor Mr. Pell, unalike though they otherwise were, cared much for emotionalism. We were expected to take our religion soberly and

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

seriously, and not to shout about it in public. The best way to stop anybody from getting religion too loudly at a prayer meeting in the Congregational Church in Williamstown was to call for a hymn. If Mr. Ainsworth was present, and he usually was, there was noise enough then.

Still, a prayer meeting was different from the regular Sunday morning service. It was more informal. In theory, anyhow, anybody present could offer a prayer or a personal statement, which he couldn't do, of course, Sunday morning. The minister became a sort of moderator. I found this interesting, the way a play was, or an adventure book, because you never knew what would happen next.

So I would remember, even if there were not other reasons, the night Deacon Slater got up and said he had been doing a lot of praying lately. He was, he said, a naturally stingy man, maybe the stingiest man in town. He had been praying to the Lord to help him overcome this weakness, and he thought he was making some progress.

There was quite a silence when Deacon Slater sat down, because the truth seemed to most persons about as he had stated it. He really was a stingy man, perhaps the stingiest man in town.

Mr. Blake promptly called for a hymn.

I asked my mother on the way home what Deacon Slater meant and if he really was as stingy as he said.

She debated with herself for a while. Finally she shook her head. "If he was," she concluded, "he wouldn't say so."

2

I didn't then know much about Deacon Slater's story. A boy of ten doesn't—or didn't—know much about any adult's story. It seemed to a boy of ten that an adult had always been an adult. I knew my father and mother couldn't have been born at their present ages, as of 1898, but I couldn't believe with my heart and emotions that my parents had ever been ten years old.

So I thought of Deacon Slater as having always been Deacon

R. L. DUFFUS

Slater, even with the title of deacon tacked to him like a set of whiskers. But people said Albert Slater had once been a hired man, and I did know a hired man or two.

The only men who got their land easy in Williamstown were those who inherited it. There were a few of these, the substantial old families. I suppose Mr. Ainsworth's land, which he did not farm except as he sold his hay on the stalk once or twice a year, was an inheritance. But even those who inherited farms couldn't sit around and let nature pour bounty in their laps. They had to work. Even if they had hired men to help them, they had to work.

Some farmers cut down their maple trees—their sugar bush, as we called them—for timber, and then sat around in late winter when they should have been sugaring. We didn't respect such men.

But there were also young men on their way up; and now I see that Deacon Slater must have been one of these when he was in his prime. To understand Deacon Slater one has to understand that this was no affair of buying for a certain sum and selling for a larger sum. What the young man who was to become Deacon Slater had for his earthly possession was what he produced out of the land with his own labor. Some of this he and his family ate, and some he sold; but it was his sweat and ache that gave it value.

That was what a dollar or a dime was to Deacon Slater: aching and sweating, doing more than he wanted to do, stumbling late into the kitchen after the chores were done, eating enough to make him sleepy and soggy but not eating for fun, the way we boys did, the way village folks who didn't work too hard seemed to do.

I could understand this situation at the age of ten. We village boys were really the only leisure class Williamstown had. We alone ate without sweat on our brows, we alone reaped where we had not sowed.

It was different for the farm boys who did their chores before coming to school and after getting home from school, and who

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

all winter long got up by lamp-light. They knew what hard work was, they knew what a dollar or dime meant in terms of hard work, just as Deacon Slater did. My brother and I learned this, too, but not so thoroughly—not at that time.

I suppose this was how Deacon Slater lived when he was a boy. Still, I couldn't get it clear in my mind that Deacon Slater had once been ten years old, then had gone through all the ages up to twenty or so, then had got married and become what he was now. Deacon Slater was Deacon Slater, that was all there was to it, just as Stevens Branch was Stevens Branch, always had been, and always would be.

My maternal grandmother, marrying a second time after Josiah Graves' death, took for her husband a man who had started life as a bound boy—or apprentice. At the age of twenty-one, I think it was, he had been given a new suit of clothes and a hundred dollars. That was what he had in the world.

He was successful, according to his opportunities and the standards of his time. He was so successful that when the time came for me to be born my mother went home to her mother on a prosperous farm in Waterbury, on the Winooski River below the village, and made this my birthplace.

As Luther Davis (my step-grandfather) got ahead in life, he left the farm and moved into Waterbury village to a house where I later lived with my grandmother and my aunt, my mother's sister, during my high school days. My brother and sister also fondly remember this house.

Such was the achievement of a man who started with nothing but a suit of clothes and a hundred dollars. I think he valued money, as well he might have done; but he had a kindly disposition, and whenever he and my grandmother and my aunt came to visit us in Williamstown, which they did once or twice, I always wept at the parting and wanted to go back with them.

I remember my grandfather in his coffin, the first such sight I had ever seen. I remember, too, my grandmother saying that during his final delirium, in the crisis of the pneumonia that killed him, he thought he was driving his horses in the woods

R. L. DUFFUS

Slater, even with the title of deacon tacked to him like a set of whiskers. But people said Albert Slater had once been a hired man, and I did know a hired man or two.

The only men who got their land easy in Williamstown were those who inherited it. There were a few of these, the substantial old families. I suppose Mr. Ainsworth's land, which he did not farm except as he sold his hay on the stalk once or twice a year, was an inheritance. But even those who inherited farms couldn't sit around and let nature pour bounty in their laps. They had to work. Even if they had hired men to help them, they had to work.

Some farmers cut down their maple trees—their sugar bush, as we called them—for timber, and then sat around in late winter when they should have been sugaring. We didn't respect such men.

But there were also young men on their way up; and now I see that Deacon Slater must have been one of these when he was in his prime. To understand Deacon Slater one has to understand that this was no affair of buying for a certain sum and selling for a larger sum. What the young man who was to become Deacon Slater had for his earthly possession was what he produced out of the land with his own labor. Some of this he and his family ate, and some he sold; but it was his sweat and ache that gave it value.

That was what a dollar or a dime was to Deacon Slater: aching and sweating, doing more than he wanted to do, stumbling late into the kitchen after the chores were done, eating enough to make him sleepy and soggy but not eating for fun, the way we boys did, the way village folks who didn't work too hard seemed to do.

I could understand this situation at the age of ten. We village boys were really the only leisure class Williamstown had. We alone ate without sweat on our brows, we alone reaped where we had not sowed.

It was different for the farm boys who did their chores before coming to school and after getting home from school, and who

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

all winter long got up by lamp-light. They knew what hard work was, they knew what a dollar or dime meant in terms of hard work, just as Deacon Slater did. My brother and I learned this, too, but not so thoroughly—not at that time.

I suppose this was how Deacon Slater lived when he was a boy. Still, I couldn't get it clear in my mind that Deacon Slater had once been ten years old, then had gone through all the ages up to twenty or so, then had got married and become what he was now. Deacon Slater was Deacon Slater, that was all there was to it, just as Stevens Branch was Stevens Branch, always had been, and always would be.

My maternal grandmother, marrying a second time after Josiah Graves' death, took for her husband a man who had started life as a bound boy—or apprentice. At the age of twenty-one, I think it was, he had been given a new suit of clothes and a hundred dollars. That was what he had in the world.

He was successful, according to his opportunities and the standards of his time. He was so successful that when the time came for me to be born my mother went home to her mother on a prosperous farm in Waterbury, on the Winooski River below the village, and made this my birthplace.

As Luther Davis (my step-grandfather) got ahead in life, he left the farm and moved into Waterbury village to a house where I later lived with my grandmother and my aunt, my mother's sister, during my high school days. My brother and sister also fondly remember this house.

Such was the achievement of a man who started with nothing but a suit of clothes and a hundred dollars. I think he valued money, as well he might have done; but he had a kindly disposition, and whenever he and my grandmother and my aunt came to visit us in Williamstown, which they did once or twice, I always wept at the parting and wanted to go back with them.

I remember my grandfather in his coffin, the first such sight I had ever seen. I remember, too, my grandmother saying that during his final delirium, in the crisis of the pneumonia that killed him, he thought he was driving his horses in the woods

R. L. DUFFUS

and was talking to them. He died working, so it now seems, leaving my grandmother with a modest competency. All this life of hard work had not, however, made him a stingy man; he merely knew what it was that gave value to a dollar.

Stingy and *mean* were words you used when you didn't like a man. If you liked him, or respected him, or owed him money, or expected to inherit from him, you said he knew the value of a dollar.

My grandfather Davis knew the value of a dollar, but people didn't use harsh adjectives about him, not that I ever heard of. The question was, however, whether Deacon Slater was or was not a stingy man, and maybe the stingiest man in town. When the Deacon had mentioned this matter in prayer meeting he had no doubt done it on the spur of the moment, and with a desire to humble himself and please the Lord. He hadn't meant to make an issue of it.

But he did. Not much was happening just then. There weren't any scandals worth talking about. The outside world didn't matter too much, even though some persons in New York and Washington were even then planning a war.

3

One not too cold dreamy afternoon about this time, some of us were woods-roaming on an off Saturday, or maybe during one of those frequent vacations that come in a twenty-eight-week school year. There was a thaw, and snow melting, and a drip of water. I suppose Ralph Stevens and Jim Nutting were along, and perhaps my brother, and maybe one or both of the Linton boys. We weren't roaming for any definite purpose, although I believe the theory among us was that we were Indians, or pioneers looking for Indians. The theory didn't matter too much. It was wonderful just to be alive and out of doors.

We came unexpectedly out of the woods into a level pasture clearing, then into a meadow with some hummocks and bunch grass at the lower end and a cow or two grazing on withered

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

grass from which the snow had melted; next we came to the hay barn and the cow barn, beside which was a neat brick house. At one side were the corn cribs, with open, out-slanting slats to let the corn dry, and nearby was the hen yard, with its white-washed coops and sharp but not unpleasant smell.

As we came up, a rooster crowed, a hen announced that she had just laid an egg, and there was an aimless, happy clucking from other hens that were doing nothing in particular except enjoy life. We boys understood that—we weren't doing anything in particular, either.

I had a sensation of utter peace, such as I rarely had even then, and have never had as an adult—except, perhaps, on an occasional camping trip.

I stood still for a long moment. I think we all did. I can still see, hear, and smell everything that came to my senses in that interval of time. Years later I went back to see if all I imagined was true: it was. Some of the magic had gone, but a red fox loped silently across the pasture and under a rail fence.

"He's a good farmer, anyhow," said one of the boys, Jim Nutting, maybe.

"Who is?" I asked, for I hadn't paid much attention to where we were going and didn't recognize the farm. Indeed, perhaps I wouldn't have recognized it in any case, for the dream lay hazy on it, and it was not a real farm at all, but a farm out of a story book.

"Deacon Slater," retorted Jim Nutting, giving the words a scornful intonation.

And in fact there was the Deacon himself, coming out of the cow barn with a pitchfork in his hand. He was not a smiling man, but he looked pleasant enough and greeted us in friendly fashion.

Is he really the stingiest man in Williamstown, I wondered. There wasn't anything stingy about the farm and its buildings, unless he had discovered that neatness and thrift go together.

We hung around for a while. On some farms the farmer

R. L. DUFFUS

would have called out to his wife, who would be working in the kitchen, to give us some doughnuts or cookies, or at least a drink of buttermilk. I didn't like buttermilk, but I preferred it to nothing at all. We eyed Deacon Slater somewhat hungrily, I imagine. But he didn't call Mrs. Slater. After a while he waved goodbye to us, with the remark that we'd better be getting home if we expected to be there for dinner, and went back into the cow barn.

Maybe that was stingy, I thought. But did it make him the stingiest man in Williamstown? After all, he hadn't been talking about giving doughnuts, cookies, or buttermilk to boys that evening at the prayer meeting; he had been talking about foreign missions and other good works to which he thought he ought to contribute.

Suppose he saved money by not giving us anything to eat, and then gave the money to foreign missions? Would that be stingy?

The other boys didn't debate this subject, at least not out loud. If they couldn't get anything to eat at the Slater farm, they intended to go where they could.

What I got out of that sunny winter day was a conflict of impressions: first, the deep sense of peace that brooded over Deacon Slater's land and buildings; second, the care he took of everything in them and on them. Whether or not he felt any peace was another question. I couldn't imagine him stopping his work long enough to look up at the sky and wonder about it.

Next day, when I went up to the Linton store to see what was going on, I heard that the boys at the livery stable had been putting up bets about Deacon Slater's remark at the prayer meeting. The only trouble was, they couldn't decide just how to prove who was the meanest and stingiest man if Deacon Slater wasn't.

My father asked my mother just what Deacon Slater said to stir up all this commotion, and she told him.

"He wanted to impress people," said my father. "He knows

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

very well there are stingier people in town than he is." He gestured toward Mr. Ainsworth's side of the house. "Do you remember the time he gave what he called a party and served small green apples for refreshment?"

My mother did. "That was all he had, maybe," she commented. "He was taking his meals at the Monument House."

"He could have bought a bag of candy," my father said. This made him recall a man he had known when he was a young granite cutter in New Brunswick for a while. This man would have a fit of generosity and buy a large box of candy on a Saturday night to share with my father and perhaps one or two others. Then he would sit nibbling at it, after passing it around once or twice, and eat practically all of it himself.

"He probably had a craving for sugar," my mother remarked.

I asked what made people stingy.

My father said they were born that way. There were just as many stingy people in Scotland as there were in Vermont—more, because Scotland was bigger.

My mother kept still for a while, and then suggested that people were stingy because they hadn't had enough when they were children and were afraid they wouldn't have enough when they were grown-up.

My father replied that this couldn't be true of Jim Beckett, who squeezed every penny he could out of everybody he had dealings with, and never let go of a single cent if he could help it. Jim might have been poor when he was a boy, but so was his brother George, in that case, and George Beckett would give the shirt off his back if anybody really needed it.

My mother thought you could be saving without being stingy. There was Mrs. Gorham's mother, for instance, Mrs. Caldwell, a lovely old lady who spent a lot of time rolling pieces of old newspapers into spills that could be lighted at the stove and thus save matches. There hadn't been enough matches when Mrs. Caldwell was young, and they had cost too much.

There were elderly people in our town who saved string, old

R. L. DUFFUS

nails, old newspapers—George Ainsworth practically cut his living space in half by the old newspapers he didn't read and wouldn't throw away—odd pieces of lumber, and clothes that nobody would ever wear again.

My father said it was a good thing for young people, especially boys, to learn the value of money by hard work. My brother and I did learn this lesson, in moderation. My brother once worked all day in a farmer's hayfield and received twenty-five cents in exchange. I suppose my father would have said about this that my brother learned the value of money, but that the farmer didn't have to—he knew it already.

All this set me to thinking of the time my brother and I contracted to deliver wild raspberries for canning to a shrewd neighbor of ours, at ten cents a quart. The berries were dead ripe and as we picked in the hot sun, they softened and sank a little in the pails. The result was that each quart we delivered came to maybe a quart and a quarter.

But this wasn't the way Mrs. Mims saw it. She said the berries were second-rate, and paid us eight cents a quart. We were too young to argue this matter with her, for in our world adults were generally held to be right. But I still think Mrs. Mims was a stingy woman, although she never got up in prayer meeting and said so.

The Slater farm wasn't far from the village, except, of course if you were a boy and found a lot to look at on the way. You cut across an end of Mr. Ainsworth's meadow, stopping in certain seasons of the year to eat black raspberries from a bush near the hay barn and get your teeth full of seeds, but they weren't too bad when they were full ripe; or maybe you found a gooseberry bush and if you had the patience to get the spines off the gooseberries, if they were of that sort, you could stand it to eat some; then you crawled under the fence and went up the hill to the left of the falls, and you might find some spruce gum if you looked carefully, and you could chew it if you hadn't any loose teeth at the time; and if you didn't intend to drink any milk right away you could eat a

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

chokecherry or two if there were any such; and the brook came down and was worth looking into in case there might be a frog or two in sight, or a small trout hustling under a stone.

The Slater farm wasn't far, but a boy might be delayed getting there. Yet I did go past there quite frequently, sometimes with other boys, as on the occasion I have already mentioned, and sometimes on a scouting expedition of my own.

Once Mrs. Slater came to the door, I think with a pail of kitchen scraps for the pigs. She looked neat and gray, thin and very tired, but friendly enough. It seemed to me that both the Slaters were friendly, but didn't have much time to work at it.

She said, "Hello, Robbie," though I was surprised that she knew my name.

I said hello, and stood still and fidgeted, wondering what to say or do next.

"Are you all alone today?" she asked.

I said I was. She seemed to think hard for a moment, then made up her mind. "You come into the kitchen and I'll give you a doughnut," she said. "And some buttermilk."

My spirits rose, then sank, but there wasn't anything to do but follow her into the kitchen. She laid out the doughnut on a clean table, with oilcloth shining on the top. Then she got the buttermilk.

"I always said," she remarked, "that if buttermilk was good for pigs, which it is, it ought to be good for growing boys." She drew a long breath. The Slater boy had grown to be a young man and had drifted off, nobody seemed to know just where.

"Yes, mam," I said, and gulped the milk down as fast as I could.

"Do you always shut your eyes when you drink?" asked Mrs. Slater with a faint smile.

I said I didn't know. I wasn't sure that the milk wouldn't be right back up again.

"Could I take the doughnut with me?" I said.

"If you want to. I'll have to be getting the washing in."

R. L. DUFFUS

I thanked her and went out, carrying the doughnut like a big ring over the forefinger of my right hand. I wondered why she suddenly laughed, the first time I had heard her do that, as I left.

The buttermilk finally made up its mind to stay inside me, and in a few minutes I reached the hill above the village and sat down to eat the doughnut, pretending it was a strip of jerked venison.

Maybe she was trying not to be stingy, I thought. Or maybe it was just the Deacon who was stingy. I wondered if he was still praying to get over this fault and if his prayers were having any results. My own prayers usually didn't, but maybe, I reflected, that was because I prayed for solid things, such as a horse to ride, and not just to be a better boy.

I wanted to be a better boy, that was certain. What I was afraid of was that if I got too good I wouldn't have much fun. A really good boy wouldn't steal apples. Yet this might mean that a slightly bad boy would get more apples than a really good boy. What was the sense of it?

Yet I did get an apple not long afterward, without being a bad boy. I got an apple, free, from Deacon Slater. I had again drifted up to the Slater farm on a solitary ramble, without really intending to go there, and perhaps balancing the disadvantages of having to drink a big glass of buttermilk against the advantages of getting a doughnut or maybe some cookies. I suppose I was still worrying about Deacon Slater, and what kind of man he really was.

It was again about the middle of the morning and the Slater farm seemed as peaceful as ever. Deacon Slater was sitting in the sun on a pile of sawed chunks of wood. This surprised me, and I stopped short. I had believed that when Deacon Slater was at home and not eating or sleeping, he was working. But he wasn't working. He looked puzzled and thoughtful.

I waited for him to speak. "I'm taking it easy today," he said, as if he were apologizing. "Something is wrong with my insides. I've got a pain. I couldn't eat my breakfast." He

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

stopped. "I guess you ate yours. What did you have for breakfast?"

I had had twelve griddle cakes, with maple syrup. "Griddle cakes," I said.

Deacon Slater clasped his stomach and groaned a little. "I'd give a million dollars, if I had a million dollars, if I could eat something that tasted as good to me as those griddle cakes tasted to you."

"A million dollars?" The words jumped out of me. A man as mean as Deacon Slater said he was couldn't be talking in sums like that.

The Deacon corrected himself. "Well, make it a thousand dollars. I could raise that much on this farm. I've done a lot to this farm. It's worth a good deal more than that."

He got up painfully and began to walk me around as though he were a guide showing people the sights. "I painted the house," he said. "It hadn't been painted for years. That was after Gil went away, but I thought he might come back. I built that barn from the bottom up. Before that there was just one barn, with the cows down below and the hay up above, but it didn't hold all the hay we could cut and we had to buy some."

"I see," said I. I was interested but embarrassed.

He turned sharply. "No, you don't," he cried. "Nobody sees." He was talking to me as though I were a grownup. "Some people think I'm made of money, and don't have to work for it. When I say it's hard for me to give money away, they laugh."

We went on talking, he lumbering ahead, myself following with shorter and quicker steps. "There!" he indicated the stubby pasture land. "I cut the trees off that with my own hands—beech and birch and pine and an elm or two. I didn't cut my sugar bush, the way some men around here do. And I didn't have a hired men, and she didn't have a hired girl, except once, a long time back, when Gil was born. I owed that much to her; but she agreed she wouldn't want money

R. L. DUFFUS

we could save for Gil being spent for a hired man, or a hired girl, either. We've both worked hard, but she's never complained about it."

"I see," said I. I didn't know what I saw, but those were the only words I could think of.

"When a man is stingy," Deacon Slater went on, "he is stingy on account of something. He isn't just stingy. You remember that when you grow up, Robbie."

We walked on a little further, going up the slow rise of the pasture until we could look back at the house and the barns. A thin wisp of smoke was rising from the kitchen chimney.

I made the only original remark I had made that day—or for several days. "It's kind of quiet, isn't it?" I ventured.

He nodded. "Yes, it is. It's real quiet. I like it that way. Real quiet." He was still for a few moments. "Would you like to be a farmer when you grow up, Robbie?"

"No," I replied promptly. "I want to be an engineer."

"A what?" demanded Deacon Slater.

I was sure my answer hadn't pleased him. "An engineer," I repeated. "Like Mr. Webb."

Deacon Slater snorted in an un-Christian fashion. Then he sighed. "Gil must have felt that way," he said. "I don't know that he wanted to be an engineer and sit around all day pulling a throttle and blowing a whistle. Gil had some sense. But he didn't want to be a farmer." He paused, looking over his land and buildings with a sad sort of proudness. "Maybe he was right. When Ma and I are gone this farm as likely as not'll go back to woods again. I can raise good apples, but not as cheap as those from New York State, and they say they're bringing them in now all the way across from the State of Oregon. We can raise our own eating vegetables. I can sell some milk to the creamery, or I can peddle it at five cents a quart; but that's a hard way to get cash money." He shook his head. "Maybe Gil was right. And maybe it's no use trying to save a little for him, the way Ma and I have been doing for about five years. It gets

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

to be a habit, saving." He turned abruptly. "Were you at prayer meeting when I said that?"

I nodded.

"Drinking liquor is a bad habit," said Deacon Slater, "and smoking is a bad habit, and women—but you wouldn't know about that—they're all bad habits and they're all sins against the Almighty, but maybe saving is a bad habit, too. That was what I meant."

"I see," I said.

"You're a good boy," the Deacon resumed. "You make me think a little of Gil at your age. I'm going—" he drew a long, resolute breath—"I'm going to give you an apple for yourself and one each for your brother and sister. Big Red Astrachans. Would you like that?"

"Oh, yes," I said.

I walked home slowly, eating one of the big red apples, with their thin skins and the white pulp, full of juice, underneath.

A few days later Mr. Ainsworth told my mother that Deacon Slater had been pretty sick and had had to have Dr. Watson come to see him. He got well, but I don't know how well. His voice in prayer meeting never boomed as much as it had once done, and Mrs. Slater, when she came with him, looked more tired than ever.

I don't know whether or not they ever heard from their son Gil. When I last saw the Slater farm, and that was years later, when the red fox seemed to feel at home on it, the house and barns were in disrepair and the land had long been out of cultivation.

The promise of spring came before spring itself. The promise of spring was one morning when the crows proceeded, all together, all talking and proclaiming the glory of God, from the

R. L. DUFFUS

East Hill to the West Hill. I did not know, I do not know, what our crows did in winter; I know only that in the deep of winter they were not within sight or hearing.

The crows came over toward the end of March, making such a noise that we all ran out to listen. I think my heart could never lift to the song of the lark as it did to this multitudinous cawing of crows. A chill of sheer joy ran down my spine. I vibrated with an indefinable emotion, an inexpressible hope. All the world and all life opened before me. The crows were openly jubilant; and so, with no words to say for it and nothing to do about it, was I.

About this same time there was another sign of spring: the snow withdrew from the base of the hemlock tree in our front yard. Finally there was a morning when a boy woke up to hear the roar of flood water in the falls above the General E. Bass House, where the brook was coming down, in a great seasonal hurry, to join the bigger streams and get into the Winooski and Lake Champlain and the North Atlantic. When I ran out to look, the ice was gone and the yellow muddy water was tumbling madly where it had been.

Then I knew it was spring; then I knew the world was, and always would be, full of joy and beauty.

CHAPTER THREE

Williamstown Branch

I NEVER heard him called anything but Old Man Webb, though he must have had a first name, and maybe a middle name. I never heard anybody mention his relatives, though he must at one time have had a wife—if he hadn't had a wife somebody would have mentioned it, for elderly bachelors were always talked about, either because they ran around with women or because they didn't—and maybe he had had children.

If he had had a wife, she was certainly dead when I knew Mr. Webb. If he had children they may have been, as we often said, out west somewhere, but they certainly weren't around Williamstown.

Mr. Webb, when I knew him, if I can truly say that a boy of ten could then or at any other time really know a venerable engineer on the Central Vermont Railroad, lived in the Monument House. Hotel rates in small Vermont towns in 1898 must have been low enough to permit steadily employed workmen to board and room there. I wouldn't be surprised if Mr. Webb paid as much as six dollars a week or as little as four dollars a week. His lunch—his dinner, as we called it, and why shouldn't we?—he took with him when he left the Monument House in the morning, walked over to the railway station, and boarded his locomotive.

Mr. Webb's locomotive was a bell-stacked, wood-burning affair of the sort seen in pictures of the Civil War. For all I know, this very locomotive may have fought in the Civil War. Its fuel was chunks of wood taken from a wood pile under a

R. L. DUFFUS

big shed beside the tracks between the freight shed and the feed store. Mr. Webb, I seem to recall, had a succession of firemen, each in turn attracted to railroading by the desire to travel and see the world, and each in turn repelled by the effect on the back muscles of spending the day heaving chunks of wood into Mr. Webb's engine.

But Mr. Webb, having passed his apprenticeship, seemed to know he had a good thing. When he got to his engine in the fairly early morning, the fireman would already have steam up. All Mr. Webb had to do was to climb into the cab, sink down into a luxuriously padded leather seat, and open the throttle. He would then back up to the baggage car and coach, or maybe half-coach and half-baggage car, that made up his train, wait for Conductor Jim Kennealy to give him the signal, and go tooling away to Barre.

This would be about half-past seven in the morning, give or take a few minutes, of which there were plenty at that time.

Mr. Webb would descend the grade to Barre, back up into Barre station as his schedule required, unhitch his passenger coach and baggage equipment, and spend the day switching in the Barre yards. When his switching was over, he would re-attach his coach and baggage car, if any, and go home, up the grade, to Williamstown. He arrived there, I presume, around half-past six in the evening.

In the meantime another train would come up from Montpelier, this one with a coal-burning engine with a small stack, pick up passengers who desired to go out into the big world, and proceed with them, first to Barre, then to Montpelier Junction. At Montpelier Junction the passengers changed to the main line of the Central Vermont, over which they could go to Burlington, via Essex Junction, or, better yet, to Montreal and the West. With this afternoon train you could scoot clear out of Vermont. With Mr. Webb you were sure of getting home.

Sometimes I envied the engineer on the afternoon train; it was by that train, indeed, that we made connections at Montpelier Junction for Waterbury—which meant, at that time, a

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

happy holiday with our grandmother and aunt, our mother's mother and sister.

But though I did want to be an engineer, pulling on a throttle and watching the world go by, I hardly expected to run an engine as far as Montpelier Junction, let alone Montreal. I was, in my way, a modest boy. I just wanted to be a Mr. Webb. It seemed to me there couldn't be any life a man could reasonably look for in this world that would be better than the one Mr. Webb led.

Yet I have seen Mr. Webb come out to the veranda of the Monument House after supper on a summer evening, put his feet on the railing, and sit there picking his teeth or chewing tobacco, or both, and spitting, and complain about how hard he worked and how tired he was.

2

The railroad and everything connected with it fascinated us boys endlessly. If we had been accustomed to seeing our parents step on the gas and go scooting off cross country on roads as smooth as J. K. Linton's new hardwood floor, we might have been less enchanted. But we didn't see many automobiles—and the few we did see were foolish and transitory models, whereas the Central Vermont Railroad operated with a good deal of certainty. Mr. Webb wasn't often very late getting his train up from Barre in the evening. He wanted his supper too much to be late, and I don't believe he was too particular about waiting in Barre for connections from the north.

Mr. Webb, in fact, gave the impression that although he co-operated with the Central Vermont Railroad the best he could, the Williamstown Branch was his own private enterprise. On a fine summer morning, he would lean out of the window of his cab, with his whiskers waving in whatever breeze there was, get the high sign from Jim Kennealy, and pull his throttle. The driving wheels would spin a little, the engine would get excited and begin to breathe hard, then it would whoosh a few times, and away it would go.

R. L. DUFFUS

Of course it wasn't always summer and not always bright and sunny when Mr. Webb left on his journeys. I suppose Mr. Webb swore like a trooper some mornings and wished he had gone in for an easy life instead of railroading.

I wonder if he would have felt better if he had known how much some small boys admired him. I wonder what he thought about small boys. He must have had a lingering fondness for them, or a faint memory of how he had felt when he was a small boy himself. He was on occasion unexpectedly kind to us; and though he sometimes swore at us, he never told our parents when we did things we shouldn't have done.

I am thinking particularly of one episode that might have made Mr. Webb bite off a few of his own whiskers and swallow them. In spite of the fact that the statute of limitations has probably run its course several times over, I shall not mention the names of those involved. I shall not even suggest that my brother was present.

When a locomotive comes to the end of a branch line, it must do one of two things: it must find a way to turn around, or it must back up. In Williamstown, as at the terminals of other branch lines, this problem was solved by a simple device called a turntable.

This turntable worked by muscle power. Mr. Webb would drive his engine carefully upon it, taking pains not to keep on into the adjacent swamp. Then the fireman—never, I believe, Mr. Webb—would apply himself to a long lever and walk the engine round until its cowcatcher was where its rear end had been. Mr. Webb would make sure that the turntable track and the railroad track were locked in the correct positions, and then he would drive his engine off again.

This process was a miracle that happened twelve times a week, counting both trains into and out of Williamstown and not counting Sundays; but with myself and my young friends it never grew stale. We watched with bugged-out eyes whenever we had a chance, and we hoped that some day Mr. Webb would invite us into the cab while the miracle was being performed.

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

The next best thing was to wait till Mr. Webb and other employees of the Central Vermont Railroad were out of sight or busy at something else that kept them looking the other way, and then operate that turntable ourselves, though with no engine.

In addition to the rails provided for the locomotive, the turntable had its own rails to turn on. It was, one might say, a sort of circular railway. Mr. Webb's fireman, or somebody less important than Mr. Webb but more important than a whole gang of ten-year-old boys, would come out once in a while and grease the turntable. I wanted to do that—I still want to—but nobody ever let me, and now nobody ever will. There isn't any turntable on the Williamstown Branch any more, nor any timetable, either, nor any Williamstown Branch.

The rest of this particular incident follows almost as a matter of course. Any reader who lived in Williamstown, Vermont, in 1898 could figure it out for himself. If a boy can get his hands on a thing like a turntable, as we did, he is sooner or later going to run that turntable off its track. And this we did—myself and whoever was hanging around with me, loose and on the town, that day.

I don't know how we did it, for the turntable must have been built to stand wear and tear. At all events, it gave a shudder, a groan, and a hollow clatter and stuck tight about half-way around. We worked at it a while, growing uneasy because it was about time for Mr. Webb to pull in from Barre, and usually he turned his locomotive around before supper instead of after breakfast.

What was about to happen was clear as day to all four of us—and again I refrain from mentioning names. Mr. Webb was going to be hungry. He was going to be annoyed with anything or anybody who delayed his arrival at the Monument House.

What did happen was a little worse than what we had expected to happen. As I have mentioned, Mr. Webb was in the habit of bringing his train in on time, regardless of what was taking place in other portions of the Central Vermont Rail-

R. L. DUFFUS

road system. On this particular day he was three-quarters of an hour late because he had had to wait for a carload of guano that was coming in from Boston on the main line. Mr. Seaver, the feed-store proprietor, had been making a fuss about this.

Mr. Webb felt that fate had been unkind, first in this delay, and second, because he had to take time to set out the car of guano at Mr. Seaver's loading platform, where Mr. Seaver could get at it in the morning.

Mr. Webb therefore arrived in Williamstown hungrier than usual, madder than usual, and fully aware that the supper he was about to get at the Monument House wouldn't be as good or as cheerfully served as it would have been earlier.

I had come upstreet after supper, a criminal returning to the scene. Or almost to the scene, for I hung around J. K. Linton's store, waiting for the whistle. Seven o'clock came, and then quarter after seven, and I knew that my parents would be wondering where I was—or, assuming that my big brother was also upstreet, where we both were.

The wail of Mr. Webb's manfully struggling locomotive came at last from down the line a mile or so. I wanted to go home, yet I was curious about what would happen. It seemed best not to wait. If I were the kind of boy who went home in the evening as his bedtime drew near I would be less likely to be suspected as a member of a gang that went around wrecking railroad turntables.

I listened as I ran, and after I had passed the Pool Bridge I looked across the meadow and the swamp to see if the engine had yet come down to the turntable. It hadn't. That worried me, too. At the age of ten, I was already a great worrier.

3

My mother asked me what I had been doing and I said I had been hanging around J. K. Linton's store. My father looked up from his newspaper and said there might be better things to do, and my mother said that if I never went to any worse place

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

than J. K. Linton's store I'd be safe enough. My father said that when he was a boy of ten he was already working after school hours and tired enough at eight o'clock to be glad to have a chance to go to bed, and not hang around anybody's store. My mother said times had changed, and my father commented that they evidently had.

I lay awake for an hour or so, or maybe fifteen minutes, for lying awake was something I wasn't used to. Then I fell asleep and dreamed that the president of the Central Vermont Railroad had come to Williamstown, with a swarm of policemen all looking like Mr. Webb in his angrier moments, and that myself and three other Williamstown boys had been arrested and carried off to the reform school at Vergennes.

In this dream my mother cried and my father said he hoped this would teach me a lesson, and then tried to knock down one of the Mr. Webbs and rescue me.

In the morning, and because of the sense of uneasy leisure I had, I think this was during vacation, I ate my breakfast, still in a worried frame of mind and not sure—indeed, I am not yet sure—whether my brother or others of my young associates were also worried.

I thought it would be best to look into the situation, but in a cautious way that would not arouse suspicion. I therefore strolled, I hoped nonchalantly, toward the J. K. Linton store, then slid around the corner, and looked toward the station. The station was just across the track from a tall sandbank. It had always struck me as a happy coincidence that this sandbank was so situated that it left a flat place for the station and tracks. I have since decided that this result may have been foreseen by the men who laid out and built the Williamstown Branch.

The two cars that were to make up the early train to Barre that morning were still standing beside the station platform. This was unusual, for it was by now nearly nine o'clock, and Mr. Webb should have pulled out an hour and a half before.

Going a little further around the corner of the store and

R. L. DUFFUS

gazing past Fred Ainsworth's drugstore, I observed that Mr. Webb's locomotive was down by the turntable, a few hundred feet south of the station, and therefore to my right.

At the turntable itself there were quite a group of men, working and arguing; Mr. Webb, whose upper portion was leaning out of the engine cab, was almost visibly swearing. A man couldn't make the gestures Mr. Webb was making and still be talking in Sunday school language.

I then realized the dismaying truth. Mr. Webb hadn't turned his engine around the night before. He hadn't found out that anything was wrong with the turntable until his current fireman had tried to turn the thing around in the morning.

Then he had found himself stuck, and his plans for the day had immediately gone wrong. As I learned then, or later, Mr. Webb liked to take a nap during the noon period that was legitimately his, and which the Central Vermont Railroad wouldn't dare try to take away from him.

Now Mr. Webb was going to be so late into Barre that he wouldn't have time for a nap, and would be lucky if he had a few minutes in which to eat the slice of steak, the fried potatoes, the thick hunks of buttered bread, and the apple pie with which the Monument House had probably provided him—that or the equivalent.

Mr. Webb was annoyed. He was listening to loud advice from the men struggling with the turntable and was giving even louder advice in return. Nobody seemed to be getting anywhere.

As a normal boy, I longed to go over and watch the fun—and listen to it. As a criminal, interfering with the Central Vermont Railroad and possibly also with the United States mails, I judged I had better not do this.

I ducked over past the station on the north side, out of sight of any possibly suspicious eye among the men struggling with the turntable, scrambled up the sandbank and found myself with some of my fellow criminals in the grass at the top.

We watched the animated scene below. Indeed, this was a good vantage point from which to inspect the whole of Wil-

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

liamstown village: the three churches, the row of stores, the houses on Main Street and on Construction Hill, the stone-sheds. I thought I might miss all this if I were dragged away to spend the rest of my boyhood in the Reform School at Vergennes.

One of my companions suddenly drew a long breath. "He's going to back the train down to Barre," said this young man. "Judas Priest! Why didn't he think of that before?"

And this was indeed what that man of brawn and genius, Mr. Webb, actually did. He came away from the turntable with a whooshing of steam and spinning of wheels, picked up his abandoned tender, now well stocked with elm and maple chunks, hitched the front end of his engine to the train, blew his whistle as though he were letting out one last cuss word, and departed for Barre.

Mr. Webb did not enjoy this form of railroading. It was, to him, unorthodox. In addition, it gave him, as he told everybody who would listen that night and for some nights to come, a crick in the neck. But he did it because he wanted to get back home at some reasonable hour and not stick around Williamstown all day, letting the freight cars accumulate without his attention in the Barre yards.

In the afternoon a small wrecking train came up from Barre and straightened out the turntable between spits. The four or five men who operated this train were not mad at anybody, because that was what they were paid for, and it did not make them late for dinner to fix our turntable. In addition, they did not know one boy from another and did not care who had caused the damage.

So we boys went over and watched them while they worked, ducking out of sight only when the station agent seemed about to stroll over. The engineer of the wrecking train was younger than Mr. Webb. He didn't bother to test the turntable by turning his engine around on it. When the work was done he backed away, blowing his whistle like mad, as though he was just as much at ease going backward as going forward.

R. L. DUFFUS

We boys kept clear of Mr. Webb and everybody else connected with the Central Vermont Railroad for some days after this incident. I thought maybe Mr. Webb would tell our parents and make life difficult for us, but evidently he didn't.

My father looked at my brother and myself rather suspiciously that evening. "They had quite a lot of trouble with the turn-table," he observed. "Somebody must have been fooling with it, they think." He paused. "If you were a little bigger I'd wonder if you boys weren't mixed up in it."

"They can't do all the wrong things that get done," said my mother gently.

"People missed connections all the way to Montreal," my father continued. He went on for a while with his dinner, and I could see, pretending all the while not to watch his expression, that his thoughts were drifting. He held his fork suspended for a moment. "Would you boys like to go to Montreal some day?" he asked.

I imagine we both gasped, as did my sister—his real favorite among us—who was not included in this suggestion.

"Montreal!" I said.

"Maybe," replied my father. "But keep away from that turn-table after this. Understand?"

4

I seemed to know now that my father suspected the truth. I don't know how the other boys felt, but I had a wretched sense of guilt. To be estranged from the Central Vermont Railroad, and that was what it amounted to, was like quarreling with a loved one.

It was sad to have to keep away from the railroad station, sad not to dare venture near the turntable any more, sad to feel obliged to scuttle past the Monument House in the evening at the sight of Old Man Webb's feet grandly projected over the railing.

The fact is, I had lost my faith in the future. After what had happened I could never hope to realize the fondest of my

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

ambitions. I might go West and become a cowboy. I might go to sea before the mast. I might enlist in the United States Army and get killed fighting Indians, the way General Custer had done; in that case I thought perhaps the Central Vermont Railroad might learn of what had occurred and feel sorry, but it would be too late.

We went exploring one lazy May day, down along the tracks toward Barre. There were bare wooden trestles at one or two places; if we wanted to be brave we would walk them, shuddering courageously at the depths below.

The afternoon train went by us twice, first on its way up, then on its way back. We didn't know this engineer, except by sight, because the way he operated he had to live in Barre or Montpelier. Still, he waved at us going and coming. We waved back half-heartedly, knowing that if he had all the details about us he would have been more likely to heave a few hunks of coal at us.

There were the usual job lot of passengers, visible through the half-open windows as the cars lumbered slowly by. I envied them, as I did everybody who was going anywhere on a train. I wished I could be among them, going somewhere to begin a new life among strangers who didn't know my past life. I thought I might be a well-behaved, upright boy under such circumstances.

Somchow the afternoon went by faster than we thought. It was a fine afternoon, with the sun sinking at last behind the West Hill but leaving a good deal of light behind it for half an hour and more. We started home as it went down, walking along the track.

We hadn't got more than half-way home, still following the track, when we heard a whistle behind us. It could be nothing less than Mr. Webb bringing up the evening train, tooting and puffing as he came up the grade, the fireman ringing the bell and having fun at every cowpath that crossed the rails. Ah, what a life it was!

We got off the track as Mr. Webb and his locomotive ap-

R. L. DUFFUS

proached. There was plenty of time to do this, for Mr. Webb was not coming very fast. I suspect he was prolonging the sensation of being about to finish his day's work and get something to eat. And, anyhow, the ancient woodburner he was operating couldn't get up the grade at much more than seven miles an hour. The snorting and puffing it made as it climbed the steeper parts of the branch line made me want to get behind and push.

But Mr. Webb wasn't worried. Mr. Webb, as we all suddenly realized, wasn't even mad. Mr. Webb had had a good day, whatever that meant to him.

Mr. Webb saw us as the train approached. We were in a sandbank cut from which we could not readily escape, though we had plenty of room to let the train go safely by. Mr. Webb had his hand on the throttle; but as he did not have to steer he could take in the scenery, boys included, as he chugged along.

Mr. Webb leaned far out of his cab window and relieved himself of more tobacco spit than I would have thought any man outside of a circus would have been capable of. Then he gazed at us fixedly, and I wondered if a sheriff or some other species of policeman wasn't riding with him and getting ready to arrest us.

And then Mr. Webb winked. He winked a wink that began well up in his forehead and ended in a twitch along the left side of his nose.

We looked at each other, the three of us—or maybe that day it was four—and then let out a delighted and simultaneous whoop. Mr. Webb was our friend again, that was what that spitting and winking meant.

I felt as though I had been sentenced to jail and then pardoned. Maybe, I thought, as I pelted up the track in the wake of the slowly retreating train, maybe I could still hope, some day, if I were a good boy from then on, to sit in a cab with my hand on the throttle, and chew tobacco and spit out the window, and maybe wave at a group of admiring boys beside the right of way—maybe, maybe, maybe—the western sky was bright with maybes.

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

Just the same, when we came up to the station where the brakeman and station agent had just finished unloading the baggage and express, I was a little shy as I walked slowly past the locomotive. The other boys had disappeared altogether, and I was alone as I came up to where Mr. Webb was standing on the apron between the locomotive and the tender, and yawning and stretching himself as though he had just come out of a nap.

"Well, Robbie," he said, and I stopped as though I'd been seized by the collar. "I've missed you lately. You haven't been sick, have you?"

I said I hadn't, and he grinned.

"You must watch for the train when you're on the track," Mr. Webb continued. "It ain't a big engine but it would chew up a small boy if it hit him." He motioned. "We're going to turn her round, seeing there's time to do it tonight. Would you like to climb up and help?" He waited, as if I would have to think this one over.

"You're mighty spry," said Mr. Webb. I was—I was already in the cab.

"Uh-huh," I answered. I was breathing hard, not so much with the exertion of jumping into the cab beside Mr. Webb as with the excitement of being there at all.

"Well, now," Mr. Webb went on, taking his proper seat behind the throttle, but leaving room in front of him for me, "you set down and pretend you're the engineer. Take that throttle in your hand—it won't bite you. It only bites bad boys."

I took hold of the lever, feeling Mr. Webb's strong hand beside mine.

"All right," commanded Mr. Webb. "Pull back slow."

I did this, aided and restrained, I suppose, by the engineer. The old locomotive breathed deeply, snorted and moved toward the turntable.

"Gosh!" I cried.

Mr. Webb laughed. "That's the way I felt, the first time," he said. "Easy there, easy now." I felt my hand go forward again as he closed the throttle, and the engine stopped. Mr. Webb

R. L. DUFFUS

gazed at me thoughtfully. "This turntable is what you might call a delicate apparatus," he observed. "It goes off the rails pretty easy. That's why we come up on it gentle, the way we're doing tonight. You take somebody playing with that turntable that don't know how it operates, and chances are they'll do damage to it."

He seemed to wait for me to speak. "Uh-huh," I said.

Mr. Webb was silent while he inched the locomotive upon the turntable, and the fireman, already in his proper post, turned it round.

"Runs like a sewing machine," remarked Mr. Webb, "since that wrecking crew come up the other day and oiled it."

"Uh-huh," I agreed.

We slid down toward the roundhouse where the ancient engine spent its nights.

"It's a tough life, being an engineer," said Mr. Webb as he climbed slowly down. "You boys wouldn't guess that. How old are you, Robbie?"

I told him.

"In eight years you'll be old enough to be a fireman," Mr. Webb continued, inspecting me carefully. "You'll be a good chunk of a boy by that time. What do you want to be when you grow up, anyhow? How much of a damn fool are you?"

"An engineer," I replied breathlessly. "I mean—"

Mr. Webb laughed. "Just like I thought," he said, "solid maple from ear to ear. Well, I'll tell you, Robbie, if you want to be an engineer nobody can say you can't. If I'm still running eight years from now I'll take you on as fireman and teach you all I know. You'll be sorry, though."

"No, I won't, Mr. Webb." I found my voice at last. "I'm sorry about the turntable. We all are. I won't ever do it again."

"Sure," said Mr. Webb encouragingly. "Sure you won't. And so far as I'm concerned you never did."

"If you'll take me," I went on bravely, "I'd like to be your fireman. I'll exercise and get real strong. I'm going to be an engineer, Mr. Webb—like you."

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

Mr. Webb came near purring. I'm glad I said this to him, for I suppose it made him feel like a success in the world. What more success can a man have than doing something that makes a boy want to come along in his footsteps?

But I never did become an engineer, though I repeatedly told my father, my mother, my aunt, and my grandmother that I wanted to be.

All I've done, aside from a little pick-and-shovel work, and things like that, has been to play with words. I've never again pulled the throttle of a locomotive.

By the end of May and the beginning of June we were sure at last that spring was not a time for going anywhere; spring was a time for not going anywhere and not doing anything, spring was a time for lying in the soft new grass, and maybe even in the shade, and letting time go by.

Why did we let time go by? It would have been so much better if we had not. But it did. It slipped through our fingers, it ruffled our hair, it teased us with all sorts of promises, it made itself seem valuable but nevertheless a value to be spent without thought. In May, at the age of ten, we lay in the grass and let time blow through us and change us. A few more springs—but that was not then our problem; we did not believe that this spring would vanish.

School would be out in May, because of the thrice-blessed poverty of the Williamstown School Board. School would be out, the agonies of speaking pieces done with, the long vacation all ahead.

School would be out, and we ten-year-old boys lay happily relaxed on the bank and listened to I don't know what birds and what wind whisperings among the trees.

Let us never go anywhere, let us never do anything in particular, let us never grow up, I thought, this is good and should last. But we did and it didn't.

CHAPTER FOUR

Once More Unto the Breach

MY MATERNAL grandmother, a wise and dearly beloved woman, used to say she never could abide telegrams. They had so often brought bad news during the Civil War that bad news was all people thought about when one of those yellow slips arrived.

This is one of my close links with what is called history: it was not history for her, it was things, mainly unhappy things, happening to human beings. She had no illusions about history, as I now recall. Perhaps she was trying to teach me not to have any.

During the Civil War, the War Department, as soon as it conveniently could, told the relatives of the dead in Vermont and Ohio, in Michigan and Maine and Illinois, what had happened. Sometimes it sent back the remains, if any. It must have done so, since there were graves of Union soldiers killed in action, as well as some dead of wounds and of disease, in both Williamstown and Waterbury, Vermont.

My grandmother naturally took no pains to make me fond of martial glory. She thought, I am modestly certain, that I was a good little boy, and she had no wish to see me grow up and get shot. Once, when a brass band from some migratory show that was to appear at the Waterbury Opera House was passing by 27 North Main Street with all its horns blowing and all its drums beating—or both of them, the bass and the snare—she shook her head mournfully. “That is the music,” she said, “that has sent many a boy to war.”

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

I was wishing, before she spoke, that there was a war and that I was old enough to be in it. But I couldn't tell her what was in my heart. I didn't dare try to make her understand my martial dreams; I couldn't explain these things to my grandmother, nor even to my mother, who remembered the day when the news came of Lincoln's death, and how my grandmother, who hated war and violence, who hated hate, had sat down and cried.

I knew a blacksmith in Williamstown, and to this day I can bring back the scorched smell that filled his misty shop when he put a red-hot horseshoe on a hoof; and how he blew at his bellows; and how the fire came up red, and how the world was thrilling and beautiful.

This blacksmith, whose name was Grover Caldwell, had been a soldier. He even had a canteen he had carried in service; if you filled it and drank, the water came out bitter as medicine. He said he had been told during his army days that this purified the water and kept a man from getting fever. It had worked for him; he hadn't got a fever, he was alive. Like most people in those days, and some now, he had faith that if anything tasted bitter, or hurt, or was in some other way unpleasant, it was good for us.

We boys asked this blacksmith one day what was a battle like? He thought a while, nursing a hoof between his knees and paring off some superfluous horny material, and smiled, I now think sadly. You never knew what a battle was like, he said. There was so much smoke you couldn't see anything.

Another veteran came to the schoolhouse, not long before Decoration Day, and made a little speech about his army experiences. I was all set for bloodshed. What he told us was that they put him and his comrades on a ship—there was a thing called "they" in that war, apparently, as in all wars, that disposed of men's bodies and souls—and took them down to Norfolk. The ship ran aground somewhere, I don't recall where, but they got it off and proceeded. But he didn't tell anything at all about the fighting. None of the veterans ever seemed to

R. L. DUFFUS

want to tell us much about the fighting. We may have had men in our town who belonged in Stannard's Brigade and who had come yelling down on Pickett's Confederates on that third day at Gettysburg; but I never heard one of them tell about it. They didn't want to, or so it seemed.

I wondered why.

My mother's sister, my Aunt Alice, had married a man who had really been killed in the Civil War. This was Uncle Lucius, who as a child had twice run away from home to get into the army, and had lied about his age until he did get in. Uncle Lucius came out with the seeds of the tuberculosis from which, almost a generation later, in my birth year, he died. My aunt received a pension; but this was no substitute for my Uncle Lucius, who had been a pioneer salesman of harvesting machinery, and a good one, and I suppose might have become rich if he had stayed out of the Civil War and put his mind to it and kept healthy.

I once asked my Aunt Alice if Uncle Lucius had killed a man every day while he was in the army in the war. She shook her head. She wasn't as bitter about war as was my maternal grandmother, her mother, but she didn't care much for it. Not every day, she said. Certainly not every day. Maybe he hadn't ever killed anybody. I was disappointed. Other boys' uncles and other relatives had killed countless Rebel soldiers, or so their nephews and such said. Why hadn't mine?

But no matter how much you cherished martial glory, you could never get much information about it out of an old soldier. If I had been a soldier, I thought, I'd have been proud to tell all about it. The veterans seemed proud only on Decoration Day, when they were the main figures in the parade.

On this occasion they wore pretty much the same uniforms they had worn in service—blue with brass buttons, and forage caps. There was a color sergeant I much admired, a carpenter, who set the butt of the flagstaff into a socket at his waist supported by a white belt and shoulder rigging. It was a big flag, and a proud one; and a man who had carried the colors in

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

action had a right to be proud, too, for in an attack he stood a fair chance to get shot.

I don't believe we had any lieutenants, captains, or majors, not to mention colonels, in Williamstown. General E. Bass, after whom our house was named, apparently belonged in an earlier war—the Mexican, perhaps.

There was another sergeant, however, and he gave the orders: "Ten-SHUN! Mark TIME! For-war-r-r-r-d MARCH." And the band, also shining in blue uniforms with brass buttons, but mostly too young to be veterans of the Army of the Potomac, would start tooting and drumming, and away the parade would go to the cemetery.

We school boys would be given small flags and allowed to march at the rear end of the procession; and there would be a marshal, riding up and down, and trying to look military without falling off his horse, which wasn't used to being ridden and wasn't a veteran of the Civil War. The marshal would have a sash over his shoulder, and he would wave everybody to go faster or slower, whichever it was they were not doing at the time; and if I couldn't be a veteran I did wish to be that marshal. But I never was either the one or the other.

The only military glory I achieved at that time—or, I might as well add, at any time—was the rank of corporal I held in an unarmed but quite ferocious unit organized among the students of the Williamstown Graded School.

The taste of glory took on a slightly bitter flavor, however, when my parents found a memorandum, in my own square-angled and then quite legible writing, that attempted to define my new responsibilities. I was, it seems, the analytical type. "The duties of a corporal," I had written, not for publication, but for my own guidance, "are to make the men stand in line."

I imagine I had visions of the Williamstown Graded School Cadets not wishing to stand in line, and of the corporal, meaning myself, using some kind of influence to make them do so.

My parents seemed to consider this memorandum funny. I did not agree with them at the time; but it may well be that

R. L. DUFFUS

their attitude changed, though it did not extinguish, my yearning for the military life.

At any rate, I turned from fantasy to, as we might say today, reality. I realized that at the age of ten I did not have the makings of a corporal in the United States Army. I did not, to be candid, really want to fight. What I wanted, as the Spanish-American War overtook us in that extraordinary year, was to be a drummer boy. I wanted to march at the head of my regiment, in some grand, historic charge, beating on my drum and encouraging others to be brave. I believed that the enemy would not bother to shoot a drummer boy.

One of the saddest moments of my early life came when I learned that drummer boys were no longer desired, because buglers—who, for some absurd reason, had to be grown up—had taken over their functions. You no longer drummed up excitement before a battle, you bugled it up.

I didn't know how to play the bugle. I still don't. Nor would it do me any good if I did. The Army, which still has foolish notions about age, wouldn't hire me. And whatever bugle calls are needed now are recorded on tape in a studio, and opened with a can opener.

2

I spoke of the Spanish-American War overtaking us. This it did by degrees. Its origins and reasons were not clear to me, but I hopefully watched its approach—a war was what a boy wanted; even if he couldn't get into it because of the foolish ideas held in the adult world, still he wanted it.

In the big pantry off the kitchen of our part of the Ainsworth House, my mother had covered the shelves with newspapers. This was a thrifty Vermont habit, although manufactured shelf paper, which cost money, was already in use in some of the wealthier homes.

You could go into the pantry, hunting for a doughnut or a mouse—there were more doughnuts than mice, but one of our cats once caught four mice at once in that pantry—and as you

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

ate the doughnut, or waited for the cat to catch the mouse, or both, you could read the shelf paper. So I remember a printed story that said the battleship *Maine* had arrived in Havana Harbor for a courtesy call. At the time all I thought of was how wonderful it would be to be old enough to be a sailor on the battleship *Maine* and visit Havana.

I was lucky not to be such. As the history books say, the *Maine* was blown up on the night of January 25, 1898, with the loss of 260 lives.

The Spaniards said her magazine had exploded; but as prospective enemies we didn't believe anything the Spaniards said. Other persons asserted that the Cuban insurgents had set off a mine under her keel, with the intention of making us think the Spaniards did it and so getting us into a war with Spain—naturally, on the side of the insurgents. Boys in the Williamstown Graded School had no doubt as to what had happened; we knew the Spaniards had done it, and that we ought to reimburse ourselves for one battleship and 260 lives by taking Cuba and anything else that was handy away from Spain.

Right was right and wrong was wrong in the Williamstown Graded School in 1898. This was mighty convenient, as I now realize.

Nobody ever traced the criminal to his lair. Perhaps he had no lair. There was, however, a Spanish-American War, whose history will not be here written except as a ten-year-old boy in Vermont saw it.

I recall a few newspaper headlines which told of our triumphant progress toward a bit of organized slaughter. By this time I wasn't waiting until my mother put the old newspapers on the pantry shelves. I heard talk at the store and around the lamp-lit table after supper at home at night. And there was no subject we talked about so much at school, or so hopefully, as the coming war with Spain.

I don't know how many Williamstown boys volunteered. A number of them did so, and at the start they had fun. First they went down the hill to Barre, six or seven miles away. Later

R. L. DUFFUS

they returned in heavy blue woolen suits with brass buttons, and had a few days of liberty. Young men who had been slow in enlisting nearly died of envy, and a few of them lit out for Barre and the recruiting sergeant without delay.

The Spanish-American War produced no good songs and many bad ones. I recall standing at the parlor organ while my mother played, my father, who had a fine bass voice, sang, and the rest of us did what we could. One song and tune prevalent at the time—I might even say epidemic—had a sort of resemblance to this:

Mid campfires gleaming,
Mid shot and shell,
I shall be dreaming
Of my own Blue Bell.

These words I have dredged out of memory's depths. Even at the age of ten I was not sure that a soldier ought to take this attitude. If he were being fired upon, and if he were expected to defend his country, he ought not to be dreaming.

However, the real theme song of the Spanish-American War of 1898 was one not written for it: *There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight*. This, it turned out, was what our troops sang when they felt like singing. Usually they did not feel like singing—and this was not because of the enemy but because of poor food and various diseases, including typhoid fever and dysentery, made available to them by a well-meaning Government.

So now my mind turns to the McAndrew brothers, Donald and Peter. Peter, the younger, was the one who enlisted.

I don't know now why Peter enlisted, what quirk, what restlessness, what fear, what disappointment in love, made him so eager to take the first opportunity to get away from granite cutting. But I knew then, in my capacity of boy about town; I knew it was because he wanted beauty and adventure, the salt and the glory of life.

Donald and Peter, as it now seems to me, had come directly

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

to Williamstown from some town in Scotland, perhaps from Peterhead, where my father was born, or from Aberdeen, where he had learned to cut granite. They had with them no family, no relatives whatsoever, and thus they were much thrust in upon each other. They were big, brawny men, and not sentimental; but there was an attachment between them that made the word brother mean something.

Donald looked after Peter. Everybody said that. If Peter had a cough, as granite cutters often did, Donald worried about it—which was a sensible thing to do, since a cough in a granite cutter might mean death. This much I knew from what my father said, before and after Peter enlisted.

But of course, after Peter enlisted the United States Government looked after him. It not only provided him with food and clothing, and maybe a tent to sleep under when it rained. It also gave him, as I looked at it, martial glory, with a minimum of danger, not to say damage.

I did not think of veterans, on our side, in any war, as being injured in any inconvenient place. Not all my grandmother's sad comments, not all my mother's reticences, could alter this boy attitude. I realized that he might die; but the death I imagined for him was a bullet through the heart, painless and beautiful. I wouldn't have minded being shot through the heart myself, if only I could have been alive afterward to listen to the kind and admiring things that would be said about me.

So if I had been Peter McAndrew's brother I would not have been uneasy about him after he had enlisted and had started off with his regiment to Tampa, Florida, on his way to wipe out the Spaniards in Cuba. Peter would be all right. Nothing unfortunate happened in a war to our kind of people, to those we knew and loved. Other soldiers often got shot to pieces and died painfully; but not the soldiers we knew best.

As for Donald McAndrew, a boy wouldn't even wonder what went on in his mind when Peter left Barre for the camp in Florida. What was in his mind was expressed in granite, later on. That was his way of talking, which in the end even a boy understood.

The soldiers went away to Florida, on their way to Cuba; but glory came to Vermont before they ever reached Cuba. It came in the person of Admiral George Dewey, a Vermonter, who sank a Spanish fleet at what was called the Battle of Manila Bay. (Eventually Admiral Dewey came home and had a welcome that must have taken his breath away. Children all over Vermont were named Dewey. So were dogs, streets, and schools.)

The war moved nearer. Few knew where Manila was, but all of us had heard about Cuba, because it was there that the *Maine* had been sunk. We were on almost familiar ground when Captain Hobson took the *Merrimac* into the narrow entrance channel and sank her, hoping—vainly, as it turned out—thus to bottle up the Spanish fleet commanded by Admiral Cervera.

I associate this episode with George Ainsworth. I met Mr. Ainsworth one afternoon as I was going upstreet. Since I was going upstreet, Mr. Ainsworth was coming downstreet. He had been at J. K. Linton's store and had got some news. It wasn't news off the radio or television, because at that time there wasn't any radio or television. Mr. Ainsworth had seen a newspaper, although I do not recall that he flourished it as he spoke.

Mr. Ainsworth halted me as though I were an adult. I suppose he had to speak to somebody about the great news, if such it was. "The paper says," he told me, "that a battleship has been sunk at Santiago." He eyed me like a Hebrew prophet. "We just have to hope," he said, the good, kind man—and this, I repeat, he really was—"that it wasn't one of ours."

In short, if anybody had to be killed, he thought it had better be a Spaniard. This seemed sensible to Mr. Ainsworth, as it did to me, and, as I suppose, to all other loyal people of Williamstown, even the grown-up ones. If a Spanish ship were sunk, and if Spaniards were drowned in the sinking, that would be an advantage for our side. Mr. Ainsworth wouldn't stretch his imagination, nor would I, nor would the adult inhabitants of Williamstown, to take in the case of a Spanish sailor who had a

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

wife and children, or perhaps only a sweetheart, in Spain, who would miss him if he were drowned.

Mr. Ainsworth, even if asked to do so by his Government, wouldn't have drowned a Spanish sailor by the simple expedient of holding his nose in a tub of rainwater until the man was no longer interested in breathing. Just the same, Mr. Ainsworth would have been pleased if quite a number of Spanish sailors had been destroyed in the sinking of a Spanish ship of war at Santiago; and he would have been sad if American sailors, with just the same number of parents, children, or sweethearts, had given their all for their country.

This did not seem illogical to Mr. Ainsworth. It did not seem illogical to me. I am not even now saying it is illogical; it is just the way things were in Williamstown, Vermont, in 1898.

What had happened was that Captain Hobson had taken a volunteer crew in the collier *Merrimac* into what he thought was the main channel of Santiago Harbor, and had there sunk her. Mr. Hobson was a brave man, and his crew were all brave men. What they lacked was accurate charts of the harbor entrance, and this did not prevent them from being eagerly welcomed when they came home in the fall after our glorious victory. Delegations of beautiful girls—that was what everybody said—met them at the railway stations and kissed them. I did not then see much sense in this.

Hobson's glory was just part of the glory that went with quite a small war. Almost everybody had some glory. Colonel Theodore Roosevelt led his Rough Riders up San Juan Hill—though later he said he had had to run like hell to keep up. There was a battle called El Canay. General Shafter, weighing three or four hundred pounds, commanded the infantry. The battleship *Oregon* steamed round Cape Horn from San Francisco in time to get into the big sea battle when the Spaniards came out.

As the boys in the Williamstown Graded School used to say, admiring our country and glad to be future citizens, the United States had never lost a war; other nations lost wars, but we did not; and this war with Spain was no exception.

R. L. DUFFUS

The bugles blew—adults, fortunate adults, blew them, as I have said—the flags waved, and the American arms prevailed. I wondered why we did not go over and conquer Spain, and perhaps annex it, but—luckily, as I now admit—older and wiser heads decided otherwise.

There was one stain on the glory. American soldiers sickened and died of camp diseases in Florida. Those who got to Cuba had the same or worse diseases there. The Army had doctors, but the doctors had forgotten that during the Civil War more soldiers died in camps and hospitals of plain old-fashioned ailments than of wounds received in battle. I knew this, in 1898, at the age of ten. I knew it because I read it in the newspapers.

Yet I still believed in martial glory. I hoped the Philippine Insurrection, which was the name we gave to the efforts of the Filipinos to run their own show without our help, would still be going on when I was old enough to join the Army. War was wonderful, I thought. I felt that my lot was an unhappy one, in that I had been born too late to be in the Civil War, and not soon enough to be in the Spanish-American War.

4

None of our soldiers from Williamstown died in battle during the Spanish-American War. None of them, so far as I know, ever got out of the country. I don't even know how many of them died at all, except, a long time afterward, of old age, or perhaps of various kinds of accidents.

Peter McAndrew came back from Florida, after Havana fell. At least, somebody resembling Peter came back. Peter had been a hale, hearty man, full of the physical joy of life. I believe he had played on the town baseball team.

But he came back thin and tired, and he didn't play baseball, and he didn't ask for his old job at the stonesheds. He would have to rest a bit, his brother Donald said; he'd been sick down there in the hot climate of Florida; it would take him a while to get his strength back again.

Donald said this in Peter's hearing. He didn't say much of
292

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

anything about Peter when Peter wasn't there. Donald looked solemn, but the Scots often did; it was their nature, Mr. Ainsworth said.

Peter himself said almost nothing at all. He just seemed to be waiting for something. He was like a man listening for hoof-beats around the bend, and a messenger coming with news or a summons.

If a man at leisure around our town wished to be sociable he would turn to J. K. Linton's store, which was also the postoffice, and be sure of meeting somebody to talk to. Peter didn't go there, not after the first few days, when there had been a small, pathetic flurry of welcome. He wouldn't let anybody be sorry for him; he said he was all right and he'd been lucky; we should have seen some of the boys who had had to be carried off the train at Montpelier and Barre. He could walk, anyhow, he said, and that was something.

But he seemed to want privacy. He seemed to want to think. Somehow people knew this desire of his, and respected it.

Peter took to sitting in the sun in front of Martin's drug store, on the north side of the hotel, not far from the livery stable. He sat there, except as people stopped a moment and spoke and went on, alone. The livery stable boys exchanged jocular greetings with him coming and going, but now there was a kind of tenderness about them.

The year wore on, and after a while, as I remember, Peter buttoned up the blue uniform coat he was still wearing, and then, a few days later, put on his Army overcoat. It wasn't cold enough for an overcoat—we boys knew that. Martial glory was a chilly thing while Peter McAndrew sat there, on a chair the druggist put out for him, and tried to get well enough to go back to his old job in the stoneshed.

After a while, and this must have been in the early fall, Donald McAndrew formed the habit of coming by on his way home from work, and the brothers would walk home together, slowly. It wasn't a long walk, just over the bridge by the blacksmith shop and then to the curiously painted red-white-and-blue

R. L. DUFFUS

house, a boarding house at that time, where they lived. Then the days got shorter, as they did then the same as now, and Peter went home early before the closing whistle blew, or, more frequently, as the days grew colder, stayed in his boarding house, where he could sit by the kitchen stove.

I think it was on one of the last days Peter sat out in front of the drugstore, a real sunny day in Indian summer, that Anna Marie Sylvester came by—and I did believe that she and her name were the loveliest feminine things in the world. She was very old, maybe as old as nineteen; but at ten I loved her, purely and all inside myself.

I couldn't ever speak to Anna Marie Sylvester because I loved her so; indeed, if she had been a princess or a queen instead of a hired girl in the Ellsworth house while Mrs. Ellsworth was expecting a baby, I wouldn't have been so much in awe.

She didn't see me that day, but she did see Peter McAndrew, and in a flash I knew, looking from one to the other, that the same thing—a nameless, terrible, and beautiful thing—was in the eyes of both of them. She had a pale complexion at that time, but her cheeks were flushed.

"Hello, Peter," she said.

"Hello," he answered. "Anna Marie."

"You're feeling better?" she said.

Peter nodded. "I'll be all right."

She came a little closer, because his voice was low or maybe because she didn't want me to hear. I drew back, because I was afraid of Anna Marie, and I didn't hear much of what she said.

I wondered if he, too, were afraid of Anna Marie, because she was so beautiful.

She waved her hand as she turned away. He raised his own hand, and let it fall back on his knee.

"Some night," he said, "when I'm better we'll go dancing."

She turned again, and went on toward J. K. Linton's store. Peter watched her go.

I think I knew what was happening to Peter. I think I knew he would never go dancing. I think I knew he was dying. As he was. As Dr. Watson had known, from the first. As Peter himself

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

had known, perhaps—only, as I knew even then, the way boys know many things they do not know they know, the dying do not speak of death, they consider the subject might embarrass the living.

We boys talked a little, shyly, with Peter McAndrew, while he was still out there, in the waning sun. I don't remember what we said. He didn't answer if he didn't want to, and we knew why. We didn't ask him what it was like to be a soldier. And, in a way, he didn't know. He hadn't charged up San Juan Hill. He hadn't taken Santiago.

So one day Peter was dead. His brother Donald sat stiff and unblinking in a front pew in the Congregational Church while the minister said kind things about Peter, and told us it was a noble thing to be willing to die in the defense of one's country. I wondered about this: Peter hadn't died in the defense of his country, he had died of some disease he had contracted while stationed in a camp in Florida. He hadn't been shot through the heart, like the heroes we had heard about.

It was a good funeral, however. The mourners went up the hill to the cemetery, along the same route the parade followed on Decoration Day—only there was no holiday feeling this time. Donald walked behind the hearse, and he and some of the other Scottish granite cutters were the pall bearers.

Then Donald went home to his boarding house, where now he had only himself to pay for. But he began to stay at the stoneshed overtime, for he had a project.

It seems strange now that Peter McAndrew's death did not, for me, take the romance out of war. This may have been because death among the young was so usual in our time and place. Nowadays, if I am tempted to lament the past, I remember that death among the very young is not considered a natural and inevitable matter any more.

I don't believe Donald McAndrew tried to put the blame where the blame might belong, on the United States Army, or on war, on the McKinley Administration, on the condition of medicine, or on God.

Donald carved a granite marker that was put over Peter's

R. L. DUFFUS

grave. It was in the Williamstown cemetery still, the last time I went there. I suppose he got it out of a book of designs; I suppose, in any case, he got it out of his heart. It was a tree trunk, broken a few feet above the earth, as though by a high wind. I saw it, I still remember it.

But I still thought, it would be a fine and glorious thing to be a soldier.

I remember an old lady standing just inside a white picket fence, in front of a small, neat white house. She is standing beside a snowball bush, as I suppose it is still called. There are roses, too; but I associate her with the snowball bush because her hair is white, the snowball berries are white, and the small, white house goes with them.

I do not remember whether I spoke to Mrs. Dole, as I think it was, or whether she did more than smile at me. Why do I so remember her across all the years? Why does this picture stay with me, why will it always stay with me until the day I die?

But there it is. I present it in my gallery of portraits, without any story, except that Anna Marie Sylvester indeed lived with Mrs. Dole, and worked in Mrs. Dole's house as long as she could, and died in Mrs. Dole's house when there was nothing else left for her to do, or to hope for.

It is Mrs. Dole, however, that I see. She fingers the snowball berries, without picking them or even marring them, and she smiles—at the whims of nature, or at life, or at the boy who for the moment is halted in front of her picket fence and can think of nothing to answer to her friendliness.

I see her standing there, even now, even after all the years. Did she know her picture was being taken?

CHAPTER FIVE

A Time for Dancing

MISTER AINSWORTH, as I was saying, had shut up the old dance hall in his house that had been used when the place was an inn; really devout people were opposed to any kind of dancing in which anything approaching an embrace was possible. The Catholics were an exception to a certain extent, the Methodists were more strict than the Congregationalists, and for the life of me I cannot remember how the Universalists felt about it.

Still, you couldn't quite kill the dancing impulse, and some young persons who later settled down, married, and raised large families had their wild dancing year or two first.

For me, this dancing was a thin, far-away lilting of violins. I don't even know where it took place. It might have been in the hall over the drygoods section of J. K. Linton's general store. It was possible, too, to drive to Barre if the young man had the use of a horse and buggy; and if the weather were fine, the young man and his girl could have a good time driving back and watching the dawn come, and maybe getting home in time for milking, or sweeping out the store, or going to the stone-sheds for a day's work.

Some parents worried not only about the dancing but about letting their daughters stay out so late, or so early; my parents didn't have this worry, for my sister was then about six years old.

As for myself, I never did learn to dance until I was in my last year at college—and maybe not even then.

R. L. DUFFUS

However, some dancing did take place, and among those who danced was Anna Marie Sylvester. I don't know whether she danced more after Peter McAndrew died than she did before; but she did go on dancing. She was so young, so full of the music of life, that she had to.

My love life at this period, if I may call it that, was complicated. In my own age group I deeply loved Millicent Byrnes. It did not matter whether or not Millicent loved me—I didn't ask her and wouldn't have known what to do if she had said either yes or no. I also loved Miss Miller, the teacher who used to tie her apron with a big bow knot in front and then reverse it.

And I loved Anna Marie Sylvester. I loved Anna Marie Sylvester more than anybody else. This involved no trouble for anybody, for Anna Marie didn't know I existed. I did not have to marry her, or try to marry her, or not marry her, or be faithful to her—such obligations were not laid upon the shoulders of ten-year-old boys.

Two pictures of Anna Marie have stayed in my memory all these years. I wish she could have known that those pictures would last so long—I now know that it might have pleased her that even an invisible boy should keep her so long in his heart, and I did want to please her.

The first picture is of a Sunday morning in the Congregational Church. I had almost not got there in time, and when I did arrive I sat in one of the rear pews. There was room enough, for even if the Reverend Silas Blake, our pastor at that time, had had the tongues of men and of angels, he couldn't have found enough Congregationalists to fill the church.

I had been there during the first hymn and a part of the prayer, when Anna Marie Sylvester came in and sat at the other end of the pew. I wish I were still capable of the kind of joyful embarrassment I felt then. I don't know what color her eyes were, I know only that they were beautiful. I never dared look at them. Her hair, I know, was dark, her face beautifully oval, her complexion white and pink, with none of the artificial aid she would have today, her hands demure and soft, in spite of

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

the housework she must have been doing. I wanted to look closely at her, I wanted to be really invisible and dwell upon her; but what I did was to turn shamefacedly away and pretend I didn't know she was there.

My second picture of Anna Marie Sylvester brings her walking on a summer evening past the crowded porch of J. K. Linton's store. The men from the granite sheds had had their suppers and come downstreet or upstreet; and a few of the farmers had come into town after doing their chores, or were lucky enough to have hired men who could be trusted to do them.

Anna Marie wore a dark silky suit with a white blouse under the jacket, and a dark hat with flowers on it. It may have been an ordeal for her to come past the men on J. K. Linton's porch, for she must have known they were looking at her. What men ever didn't look at you, Anna Marie?

But Anna Marie came on with her head high, her eyes not turning toward the group in front of the store, yet not seeming to keep away by deliberate design. She walked past as though to music that she heard, though other persons did not hear it. Her walking was a kind of dance, as I knew even then. Watching her go by, I had a warm pride in her, as though she were somehow, however distantly, related to me.

Beyond this, I have no picture of Anna Marie Sylvester. I must have seen her many other times, but we do not choose—especially when we are ten-year-old boys—what we are to remember.

Anna Marie was a good girl. Everybody said that when they spoke of her. She was a good girl, they said, though a little reckless. Anna Marie never got into trouble, not in the way they meant it when they spoke of trouble in those days. What they meant was, Anna Marie never had a baby born out of wedlock. That was what they meant by trouble, those excellent persons living in Vermont villages, and other villages, in that far-off time. Not having enough money wouldn't be trouble in that sense. Being sick wouldn't be trouble in that sense.

The advantage of being a boy loving some girl of his own age, and some older girl, such as Anna Marie, and some totally dream girl of no age at all, was that he wasn't aware of this emotion all the time, and didn't have to do a single thing about it. It wasn't until he was drifting into adolescence that that problem, and many other problems, arose.

Anna Marie wasn't in my thoughts, therefore, all day long, or even any part of any specified day, unless I saw her as she passed by. I thought much more about Millicent Byrnes, and pictured myself in various heroic situations which would cause her to admire me rather than to give her entire attention to one of the Linton boys. But Millicent wasn't always present in my daydreams, either. There was so much for a boy to do, be, and become.

My contemporaries and myself were drawn toward girls and at the same time repelled by them. We instinctively knew we would need them later on in life, but we considered them—though I did not then know the word—effeminate. In trying to impress them we tried to be utterly different from them. We wanted to be wild and savage, but we knew they would tame us some day—and even at the age of ten we accepted this, silently, without words, a little sadly, as our fate.

Meanwhile, we were Indians.

I went fishing once in a while, or out to the combined grist-mill and sawmill at Mill Village, or in the fall rode my bicycle with my brother and other boys, or ran wild races in the gathering darkness, whooping to high heaven, as we all felt compelled to do. We tried to extend a small cave above the falls, and, failing that, built a tree house. While this was going on I forgot all about Millicent for hours at a time, and never gave a thought to Anna Marie Sylvester. They were like characters in a book I laid down and picked up again. I identified myself with them as I did with the characters in *The Three Musketeers*, except that I was a brave man with a sword and they were ladies who needed a rescuer.

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

It may have been during this summer—I don't quite know—that I passed long, long hours sitting on the driver's seat of an old meat wagon that Mr. Ainsworth had allowed somebody to abandon in the yard of one of his disused, or only partially used, barns. The canvas top was in good condition, and came far enough forward to keep the sun out of my eyes, or even shut off the rain. When I had climbed up there I was not easy to find, and I had gone a long way. I was running a locomotive on the Central Vermont, blowing the whistle at every crossing, and bound for Montreal and enchanted points beyond. I was driving a covered wagon across the plains, and the Rockies were in sight.

I could do these things without taking my attention off the book I was reading, no matter what the book was about or where the scene was laid. I read not only Dumas but The Duchess and Rider Haggard, Conan Doyle, and a few dozen of the ten-cent, paperbound books that Street and Smith used to put out. I couldn't afford to buy such books, or any books; but we boys had a friend in George Beckett, the town clerk, who was also a harness maker and a philosopher. Mr. Beckett may have procured the Street and Smith books originally with the thought of selling them. When nobody bought them he lent them, free of charge, to us print-hungry youngsters. He was the first free circulating library I ever knew.

Anna Marie Sylvester at that time didn't live too far from Mr. Beckett's shop, which was a hundred feet or less from his square and ugly house. I know she walked by sometimes when I was in the harness shop; but as between Anna Marie, a woman I worshipped but could never have for my very own, and a detective story that I could take home, I chose the book.

I might even have preferred the book to an evening with Millicent; for I didn't have to talk to the book, whereas Millicent would have required conversation of some sort. And I couldn't think of anything to say to girls I adored. It never even occurred to me that they might be interested to learn that I did adore them.

This was the year that Ralph Stevens, who lived with his

R. L. DUFFUS

uncle behind the Universalist Church, broke his collarbone. He was the second boy in town I knew who lived with his uncle. It had its conveniences, because the house rules were not strict. It also had its drawbacks, because we knew even then that an uncle, occupied all day with mending bicycles and doing other mechanical chores, could not give much attention to a boy's troubles. On the other hand, Ralph's uncle had a large collection of Old Sleuth, the detective, and we borrowed these of him just as we borrowed Street and Smith from Mr. Beckett.

However, what happened was that Ralph, my brother, and possibly the Linton boys—though I do not mean to involve them in the crime we committed, if that was what it was—had gone butternutting in Mr. Ainsworth's upper pasture, above the falls.

There was an old butternut tree up there (it is a little older now, I am sure) which still bore abundantly. We had had a little plane geometry in school, and we tried to measure the tree's height by the length of its shadow. We did not succeed, but we did conclude it was too high for a boy to climb; and we satisfied ourselves with picking up the sticky green windfalls and knocking down a few others with stones.

Then we moved over to Jim Beckett's pasture, and there found other butternut trees. Jim Beckett was the bachelor brother of George Beckett. Jim was, in his small way, a careful business man, which George was not.

Jim would never have learned that we were poaching on his butternuts if Ralph Stevens hadn't broken his collarbone. Ralph, who was an active and fearless young man, had volunteered to climb one of Jim Beckett's butternut trees to shake down some of the nuts. The rest of us lit a fire and began to lay out our lunch. I doubt if we had coffee at the time, but we may well have had frankfurters.

Then there was a thump. Ralph Stevens had fallen as he started to climb down the tree. He lay on the ground moaning. One of us got water from a nearby trickle and poured it over his face. He didn't seem to like this, but waved feebly, and went on groaning.

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

One of the other boys tore off across the pasture toward town. The rest of us may have looked longingly at our frankfurters—we were, after all, small savages—but we didn't eat any. We thought Ralph was going to die.

Dr. Watson came at last, and a farmer drove a wagon into the field. Ralph was carried home, and it was no more than a day or two before he was up and around with one arm in a sling. I felt some resentment, I must admit. Why couldn't I have been the one to fall out of the butternut tree and be a hero? After the first hurt and scare, it would have been fun. But it had to be Ralph, and for a week or so he was a prominent character around town.

One day I met Jim Beckett in front of J. K. Linton's store. Being a shy boy, I didn't especially wish to converse with him, but he stopped me.

"How is Ralph Stevens?" he asked.

I mumbled that Ralph was all right.

"You were getting butternuts on my land, weren't you?" he asked.

"I guess we were," I confessed.

He rubbed his hands, like a character in a Dickens novel—he really did, though I hadn't read much Dickens at the time and didn't recognize the gesture. "That's fine," he said. "That's fine. Of course you understand those butternuts belong to me."

I nodded, to indicate I did. I knew, but couldn't say, that in the boy world in which I lived, butternuts—and sometimes apples—belonged to whatever boys would take the trouble to get them. If I had been a few years older I would also have known that Jim Beckett had never picked any butternuts on his pasture land, or hired anybody else to pick any.

"That's fine," Jim Beckett repeated. "And I'm not going to be hard on you. I'd like you to pick all the butternuts you want on my land. We'll go into partnership. You can keep half and give me the other half."

"That's fine," I said, picking up Jim's phrase.

"Don't forget," he said, eyeing me sharply.

"Oh, no, Mr. Beckett," I replied.

R. L. DUFFUS

But somehow or other we did forget. After Ralph got well enough to walk around a lot, though not to climb trees, we picked some more of Mr. Beckett's butternuts—stopping when we had collected what we thought was our own half.

We laid the Duffus share of the butternuts out on an old table in the lumber room upstairs, next to the locked dance hall; and after they had dried out and turned dark brown they were as good as any butternuts I ever ate—better, I think, because we knew that if Jim Beckett had any butternuts that year, he bought them.

We did not mention this item to our parents, and neither did Jim Beckett, to give him credit for a kind of sportsmanship.

The last I heard on the subject from Jim was on another day when I met him on the street. I had been inclined to cross over or go round when I saw him coming, but in a small village such as Williamstown was this was not easy.

"Have you got any butternuts for me?" asked Mr. Beckett.

"Oh, no, Mr. Beckett," I said. This was about all I ever did manage to say to Jim Beckett, though I could talk all day to his brother George.

"Tut! Tut!" replied Jim Beckett.

I slipped past him and did a little running, not because I thought he would pursue me, but because, I suppose, it is a boy's nature to run when he is embarrassed, just as it is a cat's nature to wash.

This was the end of the butternut episode for that year. As for Ralph Stevens, he got over his broken collarbone, and was then no better than the rest of us.

I can still taste the butternut fudge my mother made that fall or early winter. I wouldn't dare eat any now, though; not because my innards would not be able to digest it, but because I would be afraid I wouldn't like it as well.

For one thing, it wouldn't have the remembered tang of those fall days when we went out in the brown hill pastures, and life stirred in us with an energy and joyousness we never felt in spring. Or a different kind of joy.

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

3

The Ellsworth baby was born about that time; and not long after this event Mrs. Ellsworth decided she didn't need Anna Marie Sylvester any more. In our town pregnancy justified a hired girl, but motherhood didn't. Only the rich, such as the J. K. Lintons, who were supposed to have an income of several thousand dollars a year, over and above expenses—and of course they could get all they wanted from the store, free of charge—could have a hired girl all the time.

I don't know what happened to Anna Marie Sylvester while she was working for the Ellsworths, but I shouldn't wonder if she got her first taste of a life different from existence on a hill farm. I shouldn't wonder if her pulses quickened.

She may have got a few modernistic ideas from Mrs. Ellsworth, who wasn't a woman to worry about conventions. For example, Mrs. Ellsworth kept going to church and to the store and sometimes to church sociables long after it was evident to all who saw her that she was going to have a baby.

This wasn't considered proper in small Vermont towns in 1898. Women who were visibly on the way to reproduce stayed home and sewed. When the baby appeared the mother reappeared; and as near as I can guess, the conventional adult attitude was to be surprised. I must have felt this to be right, because I was shocked when Ralph Stevens said that Mrs. Ellsworth was going to do what she was going to do. Ralph was a little shocked, too, but he enjoyed talking about it.

Village boys knew much less about life, if I may call it that, than farm boys did. Our conversation was sometimes vulgar—I would be worried if I didn't believe this—but at the ages of ten to twelve, we were almost pathetically pure of heart.

At any rate, Mrs. Ellsworth, after flaunting her interesting condition in the face of the town as long as she could, stayed home for a week or two and had her baby—girl or boy, I don't recall. I think Mrs. Ellsworth liked Anna Marie and wanted to do something for her. Maybe she wanted to help her get an

R. L. DUFFUS

education, for this was the thing a Vermonter would think of first for a young and attractive girl. Education was our highest ideal, just as I later learned it was in my father's native Scotland.

So it was Mrs. Ellsworth, I think, possibly with Dr. Watson's help, who got Anna Marie to work for old Mrs. Dole, who lived alone behind a picket fence in a small white house not far from George Beckett's house and office. Mrs. Dole had sold a hill farm after her husband died, and had enough money left over to live in town in a simple way. Now she was a little too old to be alone, and her only daughter had married and gone to California. It seemed a good plan to have Anna Marie work for her for a while. All it cost was board, and maybe three or four dollars a week.

So Anna Marie went in and out of Mrs. Dole's house. I scurried by, on my way upstream or downstream, trying not to look, hoping to see her and afraid I might. I wished I could be invisible, like one of those characters in the Arabian Nights, which I had even then read in an abbreviated and purified edition; I would have liked to stand in the dooryard and see her come down past the snowdrops and the faded rose bushes.

I don't know how my young friends felt about her, for none of them ever mentioned her until later. We didn't gossip about Anna Marie. Sometimes we looked, or tried to look, wise, and repeated scraps of scandal about other girls, that we had overheard at the store. But none of us, at the ages of ten to twelve, really knew what we were talking about.

So Anna Marie Sylvester walked in innocence and purity, just as she walked in beauty. I am sure of this now, just as I knew it by instinct then.

But Anna Marie did begin to get the dancing fever. Perhaps her parents hadn't allowed her to dance when she was on the farm. Perhaps the joy in life she so clearly had could express itself best in dancing. She might have had a gift for it, for everybody who had ever seen her at a dance—and of course this couldn't include venerable and pious persons such as Mr. Ainsworth—spoke then, and later, of how well she danced.

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

I think Mrs. Ellsworth, with her advanced ideas, would have accepted Anna Marie's dancing as natural and good. I don't know what Mrs. Dole thought about it, but I never heard that she complained when Anna Marie, after working faithfully all day, sometimes danced all night.

Mrs. Dole's mind, I think, was gently failing. It was Mrs. Dole who was reported to have said, "You know, I haven't seen Mr. Beasley come by since the day of his funeral."

And Anna Marie was kind to Mrs. Dole, I am certain. Anna Marie couldn't have been unkind to anybody. Everybody said that, especially later.

It was Dr. Watson, I know, who worried most about Anna Marie's dancing. This was not because he was concerned with the proprieties, though he was a good church member and always went to services when he wasn't needed elsewhere. Dr. Watson worried because Anna Marie wasn't in the best of health, and needed sleep if she were to get well again.

I suppose he ordered a diet for her, and I have no doubt he also made her take cod liver oil—a milky substance that you shook well in a big bottle and then shut your eyes and consumed with a big spoon.

But Dr. Watson couldn't make Anna Marie sleep when she didn't want to sleep; he couldn't make her want to be middle-aged when she was so young; he couldn't make her want to stop dancing.

Nowadays Anna Marie might not feel that the youth in her, that drove her and tormented her so, was a fragile and passing thing. She might not be so much in rebellion against a fate closing swiftly in upon her.

At any rate, I now know she set out to spend her youth as though it were an inheritance that would turn into dust if not used.

I think it was youth and life she loved, and not any special person. How she had felt about Peter McAndrew, who came back from his army service in Florida to dwindle and die, I don't know. How could I? All I know is that the last thing I

R. L. DUFFUS

heard him say to her, and also the first thing, was, "Some night, when I'm better, we'll go dancing."

Of course he never was better. It could have happened, though, that she remembered the words. It could have happened, because strange things happened in our peaceful, matter-of-fact town.

Meanwhile she had to dance with especial persons, even though she might have danced beautifully alone; might have danced in the mist that rose sometimes over the newly-mowed hayfields in July, might have danced by October moonlight, might have danced—but this I thought of later—on a great stage, with the orchestra playing for her and an audience waiting to rise to her in a thunder of applause.

But in the place where she was, and the years she had, and the time within those years, and the kind of music Vermont could provide for her, there were, of necessity, especial persons. Tony Mantelli and Bill Mansfield were two of these persons. Tony was a granite cutter, one of those exquisite and temperamental workmen who could do the last final touches on a granite angel to perfection. Bill was a hired man for a dairy farmer on the East Hill, which meant that when he spent a night dancing, he spent twenty-four hours without sleep. I didn't know Tony well, but Bill was easier to talk to and understand. Bill said that if he worked for Deacon Bulger at what he was then getting he would be able to buy himself a farm after a while—as near as he could figure it, one hundred and fifty-six years.

He shook his head sadly, and said he didn't believe any girl would be willing to wait for him that long.

But Bill went dancing a few times with Anna Marie Sylvester, and when she went dancing with him she naturally didn't go dancing with Tony, whom she had known longer than she had known Bill. Tony, it seemed, thought Bill had taken Anna Marie away from him just when she might have been on the point of becoming Tony's girl.

One Saturday night, after old Mrs. Dole had had her supper and been put to bed with a hot-water bottle, Anna Marie kissed

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

her good night and walked out to where Bill was waiting for her just outside the picket fence.

Where the dance was to be held I don't know; but Anna Marie and Bill walked upstreet in the cool fall night, perhaps close together, perhaps with Bill's arm around Anna Marie's waist. Peter wouldn't have minded that, for Peter was where he couldn't mind anything any more, or where he saw things in large and astronomical terms; Peter was where the stars began, Peter was out beyond the full moon, as I might have thought about it then.

Not that I did think about it until the next morning brought the news. There was much for a boy to think about on the night of a full moon in October besides a young woman and a man walking out together.

But the next morning the news was that Tony Mantelli had crept up on Bill and Marie from behind and tried to stab Bill in the back. I have forgotten all the details, except that Bill showed up with his arm in a sling and Tony was arrested by Constable Nichols, bound over to keep the peace, and released on bail. I believe he had to go to Barre to be tried, later on.

Everything then went on as before, as far as a boy could see. Anna Marie kept on working for Mrs. Dole, though somehow she seemed thinner and worried-looking, with a sort of shining in her eyes that wasn't pure happiness or pure youngness. Bill kept on taking Anna Marie to dances, whenever he could get time.

And Tony kept on working in the stoneshed and coming to J. K. Linton's store sometimes in the evening, just as he had always done. I don't know what people said to him or whether they avoided him or just pretended to forget what had happened. I don't know what he said to Anna Marie if he ran across her, as he must have done. I don't know whether he dropped his eyes and hurried past when he met Bill Mansfield, or whether he told Bill he was sorry and let it go at that.

Boys of my age did not speculate on such matters. What we knew was that Tony had been bound over for trial, and when-

R. L. DUFFUS

ever we saw him we thought perhaps we were looking at a man who would have to go to jail.

I don't now recall what eventually happened to Tony Mantelli. My belief is that when he finally came to trial what he had done was so far back, and the cause so completely removed, that it didn't seem to matter any more. For we were wrong, when we saw Tony Mantelli, black-haired, black-eyed, with his sensuous Italian face, moving about town, in thinking that it was he who was doomed, he out of the three of them.

4

When people in those days in Williamstown, or similar towns in Vermont, came down with what we called consumption, they usually didn't go to some milder climate—usually they couldn't afford it. They stayed where they were, and fought it out—and generally they expected to lose the fight and did lose it.

One of my male relatives in my grandmother's generation decided to stay alive when he encountered this situation. He shut himself up in an upstairs bedroom, closed all the windows and kept them closed, and went to bed. His wife brought him up whatever he wanted to eat. Some persons said that he got a lot of reading done during this period and was extremely well-informed at the end of it. Others said this was nonsense—he just lay there and thought, or just lay there.

At the end of five years, so the story ran, this male relative got up, put on his clothes and resumed a normal life, dying, of some disease other than consumption, at a ripe old age.

Modern doctors would say, I imagine, that what the man needed was quiet while his lungs healed, and quiet was certainly what he had.

But quiet wasn't what Anna Marie Sylvester wanted, and it wasn't what she had. She wanted life, as I see so clearly now; she wanted all the life there was, years and years of it, and all vibrating like tall grass in the meadows when a late June wind runs over them; she wanted joy and beauty, more of each than the whole state of Vermont could contain.

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

Dr. Watson was attending Mrs. Dole, and one day he noticed that Anna Marie was thinner and, except for the high color in her cheeks, paler. "Young woman," he probably said, in his gentle, impersonal way, "you mustn't work too hard, you must get more sleep."

He wouldn't have discussed this case, or any case. He knew the secrets of half the families in town, and kept them in his own weary heart. Perhaps it was Mrs. Dole herself who talked a little with persons who came to call on her, and worried out loud about Anna Marie.

But it was said, after a while, that Dr. Watson had told her she had consumption, and that she simply must rest. He may have tried to make arrangements for somebody else to replace her in caring for old Mrs. Dole. I don't know about that. Maybe he thought that life for Anna Marie would be easier if she stayed with Mrs. Dole than if she went back to her parents' farm.

But Anna Marie wouldn't make life easier for herself, anywhere. She didn't want life to be easy, she wanted it to be exciting. She kept going to dances, sometimes with Bill Mansfield, sometimes with other young men.

Bill Mansfield loved her, I am sure; but he had a hard decision to make. He wanted her to do what Dr. Watson said, and not go dancing either with him or with anybody else. But Anna Marie, so people said, grew temperamental as the weeks went by. She had been very gentle; but now, they said, she made fun of Dr. Watson and what he had told her, and stamped her foot and blazed up when anybody tried to argue with her.

Even Bill Mansfield. They said she slapped him once when he came to take her out and then, after he looked at her feverish face and kissed her hot lips, argued with her to stay home instead. So they came out together, and he tucked her carefully into the seat of the sulky he'd brought. I saw him do that once, though maybe not that time, and I wished I could have helped with just one corner of the robe.

I don't now know whether Anna Marie liked being tucked in

R. L. DUFFUS

or not; I don't know whether or not it made much difference to her, after Peter McAndrew died, who tucked her in; I don't suppose she wanted to be tucked in at all, I suppose she wanted all the winds of heaven to blow around her, and not be shut off from them at all.

Being tucked in by good, kind, humorous Bill Mansfield may have signified to Anna Marie the life she would lead if she gave in, and got well, and stopped dancing, and was a woman like other women, and didn't love beauty quite so much, nor hanker quite so much for things a woman couldn't have in Vermont at that time. These thoughts, for all the affection she might have had for Bill Mansfield, may have made her seem cold to him.

But he did love her. A boy of ten could know that. I insist, after all these years, he did love her; and somehow this made him an uncle, or elder cousin once removed, of my own. I thought Bill Mansfield ought to have her, and marry her, and see that nothing ever, anywhere, at all, hurt her.

I suppose that if Bill had married her, and had bought himself a farm, with a mortgage to encourage him, Anna Marie would have gone where the other farm women went: into weariness and early aging, and no fresh, venturesome beauty any more. This was the fate that waited for her, and not the worst fate that ever befell a woman. Because, as it is clear to me now, she would always have seemed young and lovely to Bill Mansfield.

But she wanted to dance. It was to dance that she was born. How could Dr. Watson prescribe otherwise for her, or Bill Mansfield persuade her? Tony Mantelli, the knife-wielder, would understand this better than Bill could.

Would Peter McAndrew also have understood? Would they two have found a way together? Peter had the Celtic in him, with all the sadness and all the force of love and joy. If he hadn't died they might have gone dancing together, as they planned, and maybe things would have happened differently.

The ten-year-old boy couldn't know these things. He could only sense the sorrow when gradually the whole town seemed

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

to understand that if Anna Marie didn't do what the doctor told her and stop dancing she would surely die—and it was only Anna Marie herself who couldn't, or wouldn't, understand.

Perhaps she wouldn't, knowing all she knew. Perhaps a world without dancing in it seemed of little use to her. Perhaps she also dreamed that if she danced enough, and somebody held her tightly enough in the waltz, and the fiddles kept the rhythm and never played *Home Sweet Home*, then she wouldn't be ill any more.

Because spring would come. I knew about spring, with the snow melting, first, around the tall hemlock tree in the front yard, and the crows swarming back by hundreds, and the flood water coming down over the ice in the little gorge behind the Ainsworth house, and finally the unendurably warm breath from the south, and a great, relaxing sweetness in the land. I knew this, and she must have known it, too, in her different way.

Anna Marie waited for spring, but she could not wait long enough. Maybe, if she had shut all her windows tight, as my relative did, maybe if she had shut out Bill Mansfield and Tony Mantelli and all the rest, maybe if she had shut out love and the hope of beauty, maybe then she might have lived well into the spring and might have seen the roses bloom again in Mrs. Dole's front yard.

My maternal grandmother had that wish, many years later, and died, as she had desired, in June. But Anna Marie was young, and what she wished was not to die at all, ever, and never to be old—and of this wish she had one portion, as everyone does of every honest wish.

She stopped dancing when she could no longer get up from her bed; and then, not many days later, she died.

My mother said to me, on the day of her funeral, "Robbie, what have you been crying for?"

I did not think she could have guessed this secret, and I said, first that I had had something in my eye, but it was out now, and, second, that I didn't know.

My mother smiled in her kindly, elderly way, though she

R. L. DUFFUS

was then, as I now realize, still young—much younger than I have been for many years. "That's the worst kind of crying," she said, "and the best."

Then she went to the kitchen and got me an apple and some bread and butter, with sugar sprinkled richly on it. "This will make you feel better," she said—and it did.

I wanted to tell her about it, wanted to tell somebody, but I never did.

During the following night there was an early snow, which I suppose covered the grave of Anna Marie Sylvester, just as it did other portions of the Williamstown earth that were approximately six feet long and three feet wide. It probably made Anna Marie's grave seem like a white mound; but I did not go to look at it.

I went sliding, in Mr. Ainsworth's pasture, on what we called a jumper, which was a sort of one-legged ski. There was a kind of red glory in the sky when we stopped, the half-dozen wild animals that we were, and scattered to our homes, yelling and hilarious and glad, for no reason we could have given, to be alive.

"Did you have fun?" my mother asked, not inquiring why I was a little late for supper, following my brother home by ten or fifteen minutes.

"Yes, I did," I answered eagerly.

But in the night, when the wind howled around the corners of the General E. Bass House, I seemed to hear violins and the soft, clear shuffle of feet.

Maybe, I thought, she did; maybe she did keep her date with Peter McAndrew; maybe she's dancing with him now, somewhere, out beyond the moon, somewhere in the stars; maybe she's happy and well and beautiful again.

At first I was a little frightened, because I wasn't certain the sounds weren't really coming from the dance hall, almost above my head. But then I wasn't frightened any more—not of Anna Marie Sylvester.

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

Because, I knew, one isn't frightened of persons one loves, no matter where they go or whatever happens to them.

The mud in the middle of the road had frozen, so that the wheels of passing buggies and wagons clacked and rattled over it, instead of slushing quietly the way they had done only the day before. Where water had collected in the ruts there was ice now. I went up along the side of the road to the Pool Bridge and noticed that the grassy hummocks in the marshy parts of the meadow were white and stiff with frost; and there was a little ice at the very edge of the brook, where the current did not keep the water moving.

There was now the sniff of coming winter in the air, though most of it would be gone by noon, and we might have to wait for three or four weeks, or even longer, before there was ice enough for skating or snow enough for sliding down hill. Now we were sure, as we had not been in September and October, that the great change of the year was coming. We had only to wait.

Even before I had crossed the bridge and come within sight of the schoolhouse yard I could hear the excited yelling of boys who had arrived before me, even before the warning bell had rung. I began to run, almost skidding on the frosty planks of the bridge, as though if I didn't hurry winter would be there before I was.

CHAPTER SIX

The Stuff That Dreams Are Made On

IF THERE were not so many other witnesses, I should think I dreamed the town I seem to remember. Surely I dreamed part of it, and a part of it was real. What my brother and sister remembered I did not wholly remember. What I remembered, and have been trying to tell, may never have been wholly in their memories at all.

Each town, each village, is as many communities as there are persons at any moment living in it.

It is true, however, that the Williamstown we each knew, in our various ways, in 1898, is not there any more. It was the stuff that dreams are made on, and it has now been undreamed, and another sort of morning has come, other than the mornings we knew.

There was a magic, and a spell, and a curse; but the magic has been waved away, and the spell broken, and the curse was a curse of sleep and not of pain.

The town and village as I knew them seemed permanent. I thought, without ever putting the thought into words, that we were fixed in time and place, and nothing would ever change very much, we youngsters would never grow up, our parents would never grow old and die, the past and future were stories and make-believe.

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

I was startled. I asked how a town could break up. I hadn't noticed anything coming loose.

Merrill shook his head wisely. He didn't know the answer. What I now suppose was that this was partly the tail-end of the depression of the 1890's, from which the Spanish-American War and, as we Vermonters, big and little, mostly saw it, the noble and wise policies of the Republican Party, had helped to lift us. It may also have been suspected, even then, that it would be better to haul granite by rail into Barre and Montpelier than to lug it by road or rail into Williamstown.

What made Williamstown the most prosperous as well as the most cosmopolitan of small towns was the granite business and the people it brought. Whatever exists seems natural to a boy, and so it seemed natural to me that our small town in the hills, in Orange County, Vermont, should have three languages—English, French, and Italian, or maybe four if you included the broad Scotch some of the men from Aberdeen spoke. It seemed natural that four distinct races or nationalities should come downtown on Saturday night to hang around J. K. Linton's store, or listen to a band concert, or see an outdoor patent medicine show, or just buzz around.

The Civil War memorial in front of the Congregational Church, on the left as you went in from Main Street, had nothing but English names on it, with maybe a few Irish. But if there had been a monument put up in honor of the soldiers of the war of 1898, English names would not have sufficed.

This was the way it was, however. This was the way it always would be. The hill farms said so. The stonesheds said so. Everything said so, the meadows and the hills, the regular comings and goings of the seasons.

It would snow in January and December, and between those months, about midway, there would be a little warmth—too much, sometimes. But the climate wouldn't change, even though Mr. Ainsworth did once remark, during a long dry spell, that maybe it was the Lord's will never to let it rain again. Nothing would change. As for myself, even though I had turned ten years old in July, 1898, it was impossible that I should turn

R. L. DUFFUS

eleven in July, 1899, and that this process should go on repeating itself until, let us say, the year 1958 arrived.

No; Williamstown, Vermont, 1898, was a finished product, the way I looked at it, the way all we boys looked at it. Who can ever believe in the future? There isn't any future.

3

We therefore looked at our town, not knowing that much of it was transient; and at the stonesheds, the particular feature of our town in 1898, not knowing that they would pass like the insubstantial cobwebs of a dream.

A boy does not think of capital investments and the returns thereon, or of what makes business in general go. Our view of stonesheds was a material one. There stood the buildings, where our parents would rather we did not go during working hours, except when sometimes we took my father's dinner pail to him. There was, during those working hours, the clickety-clack of hammers on stone—a sound I have never heard outside of the granite towns, and which I will remember to my final day. There was the great strength and beauty of this stone, the cranes that lifted and carried it, the chips that were daily wheeled out to be added to the everlasting terminal moraines around the sheds, the smell of the slush, whatever it was, that was used to polish the granite.

There were, I suppose, three worlds in Williamstown: the world of the stonesheds, the world of the villagers, and the world of the farmers.

We boys found mysteries in the worlds of the Italians and the French Canadians, but these worlds were not completely strange. Or they were no more strange than the world of all adults, for we boys were a community to ourselves.

At school there were more children of the old stock than of the Italian and French Canadian; but I think this was because the men who worked in the stonesheds were younger than the natives and in many cases hadn't yet married or hadn't yet had children.

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

As I look at a picture of the children of the Williamstown Graded School taken about 1898, give or take a year, I can detect the Scotch and Welsh blood in boys or girls whose names I remember, one or two with French Canadian names, none that I am sure were Italian, but this doesn't mean there were none, and of course the Irish. There is one boy I have always thought looked like Huck Finn—he still does, in this photograph. There is one girl I thought then, and long afterward, as beautiful as the dawn; I think I can see why I thought so, but I am not quite sure.

This picture was taken on the broad front steps of the school, with the teachers standing at the top. Some of them I remember, but not their names. What would one of them say if she asked me, as she did once, to bound Europe and Asia, naming each body of water, each bay, gulf, and strait, all the way round? She once did ask me and I did. I would like to please her, for she has a pleasant face; but I am not sure I could.

Where now is the Barents Sea? What became of it after 1917? What became of the small, ineffectual-looking boy child who sits fourth from the left on the top steps in the picture? His ears stuck out like wings but his hair was dark and plentiful. The half-frightened look he wears may have been due to his awareness that this was somehow an occasion, a frieze on a Grecian urn, a thing that this child's descendant, as in a manner of speaking is the case, would be studying more than half a century later. He would, I think, view this descendant with suspicion and skepticism. He would be glad he was not that descendant. He would be happy to stay where he is, on the top step of the schoolhouse porch on a warmish day in the late '90's—for warm I judge it must have been, since an unscreened schoolroom window is open and nobody is heavily dressed.

4

But I am not thinking so much of the passage of time as of the dwindling of a town. For though Williamstown did not break up, as Merrill Linton's father had been afraid it would,

R. L. DUFFUS

it did shrink. What was there in 1898, in that golden year, that could cast such a shadow?

As early as that year there appeared, at rare intervals, a Thing with wheels but no horse, that nevertheless managed to move along our dusty, muddy, and rocky roads. This was a spectacle we wouldn't miss for anything; but we saw it as a free outdoor circus, not as a portent of the future.

We argued over what it should be called. Many persons said it was a horseless carriage—as, indeed, it was. Others called it an automobile, and were rebuked by writers in *The Youth's Companion* and other publications, who said you could not unite a Greek root with a Latin root. This mattered to me, even at the age of ten, after I had heard my father and Mr. Ainsworth argue it.

But the Thing itself, whatever it was called, remained marvelous and incredible. It made a terrific noise. It was always breaking down. Yet it could go from Williamstown to Barre, if all went well, in not much over half an hour; and if it ran at all, it could go when its owner wanted it to.

As far as I know, it did not then occur to our elders, any more than to the intelligent children who listened so carefully to them, that the Thing would do anything to Williamstown. We did not take it that seriously.

This was one of the years, I think, when our rich Uncle Willie, my father's brother from Brooklyn, paid us a visit. I don't suppose Uncle Willie could ever have outspent the elder Morgan; but he did seem to throw dollars around the way we threw pennies, or more so. And Uncle Willie, a sagacious man if there ever was one, an iron-founder of good repute and some success, never spoke of buying an automobile. Let them have their fun, he seemed to think; he and his family would stick to horses. Uncle Willie had a son, also named Willie, whom he sent to board with us once in order to get some fresher air than Brooklyn's then was—or still is—into his lungs. He also had two pretty daughters, somewhat older than even my brother, but pleasant to have around.

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

When Uncle Willie and his family arrived—for some reason without Mrs. Willie—it was Uncle Willie's custom to buy a huge bag of candy at J. K. Linton's store and then to hire a horse and rig and take us all riding, or as many of us as could get into the rig. To this day I recall my thrill when I had fallen into disgrace for some reason, or so I thought, and hadn't been invited. Then there suddenly appeared Cousin Joanna, with a buggy, and gaily hailed me. I had been swinging in the hammock by the hemlock tree in our front yard.

Cousin Joanna was wearing some sort of thin summery dress with a silk sash, a large straw hat, and small shoes not made of leather at all, the way shoes were supposed to be, but of some fabric that resembled her sash. I nearly died, first with joy, then with embarrassment at my inability to find something to say. Fortunately, Cousin Joanna had enough to say for two persons, and maybe more. My mother said to my father later, didn't she ever stop talking? But I didn't want her to stop talking. Her talking kept me from having to say anything except yes, no, and uh-huh. And I adored being with her, especially since the others had gone off in J. K. Linton's surrey, and there were just the two of us, a sort of overflow meeting, in the buggy.

Cousin Joanna said I was a poor kid, to be left alone like that when everybody else was out having a good time. I said uh-huh, at which she laughed. She then asked me a little about school, and I told her a little. After a silence she inquired, as so many adults and semi-adults did, what I wanted to be when I grew up, and I told her, as I always told persons who asked this question, that I wanted to be a locomotive engineer. It was my hope, I believe, that some day I would find somebody who would do something to help me become an engineer; maybe somebody who had a locomotive and wanted to train a young man to operate it.

Cousin Joanna, of course, had no locomotive. Few young women had locomotives in those days, any more than they do now, except as the automobile might be called one. But she seemed politely interested.

R. L. DUFFUS

"Wouldn't you like to be a doctor or a business man or something like that?" she inquired.

I said, more positively than I really intended, no, I wouldn't.

She laughed again. "You know what you don't want, anyway," she remarked. "That's something. You're a nice boy, Robbie. I wish you could give me some advice."

I said I wished I could, and waited, but she didn't tell me what kind of advice she wanted.

A buggy and a horse provided good transportation for a young man and his sweetheart, and even for a boy and his adolescent cousin. If this sort of peaceful transportation had continued, Williamstown would still be about as it was in 1898, with some modern improvements—or so I believe.

A horse and buggy did not require the kind of roads the Thing later demanded. The curves could be tight, since a horse and buggy—or an equivalent horse-drawn vehicle—could not pass around any curve fast enough to menace itself or any other conveyance.

Cousin Joanna and I, with Cousin Joanna driving most expertly, as I thought, went up on the West Hill along the road that ultimately led to Berlin Pond. I wanted to stop and steal two of Jake Gilbert's pears from the tree that almost overhung the road—there weren't many pears ripening at any time in our part of Vermont—but I could not suggest this to that refined city dweller, my Cousin Joanna.

In fact, Cousin Joanna had to suggest it herself. We drove on again, each munching a not too juicy pear. The buggy squeaked, the way buggies did, and made a satisfying crunch when we passed over a ridge of rock that the roadmakers hadn't judged it necessary to remove.

This was no way to get anywhere, but it was a satisfactory way to spend an afternoon.

I kept hoping Cousin Joanna would come back to that question of my giving her advice, not because I would know how to do that, but because maybe she would have to tell me about her life in the big city of Brooklyn. "It's quiet up here," she

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

said. "I wish I could stay here and not have to go home again."

I wished so, too; but of course she did go home, when the visit ended a few days later, and I couldn't see that she seemed unhappy about it.

She did say, as Uncle Willie and his family were about to get aboard the train, that she and I would have another buggy ride some day. But we never did.

We never did have another buggy ride, that was the truth. Nobody had buggy rides any more, after a while, except in Bermuda and Central Park, for the quaintness of it.

The Thing with wheels but no horse made buggy rides obsolete, and, without meaning to, killed the Williamstown I knew.

The Thing killed Williamstown, and not out of cussedness, but because it was so demanding. The thing demanded a different sort of road from the one on which Cousin Joanna and I went riding. The Thing commanded that the bumps be taken out and the curves straightened. The Thing had no thought of a road taken at leisure, tasted and relished; the Thing had to be somewhere at a given time, anyhow in a great hurry; the Thing wished to hustle and dash, not stroll.

So I recall this gentle ride with Cousin Joanna with a not too melancholy sadness. It was not the last of its kind.

Cousin Joanna and I didn't suspect what was about to happen. Uncle Willie didn't suspect it. If he had suspected it, he would have rushed home to Brooklyn, bought himself a Stanley Steamer or whatever it was that could be had in that year, and returned, like a shooting star, to a deeply impressed Williamstown.

So Cousin Joanna and I went jogging through a deep mist of peacefulness, she doing the talking, I doing the listening, but both of us, I imagine, glad to be hearing the slow plop-plop of hoofs and to smell the mingled perfumes of dust, harness, horse sweat, and the vague flowers and grasses of the field.

I was quite happy. This was not a perfect year, I thought. That would come later. But 1898 was not too bad, this afternoon was not bad at all.

I don't know what happened to J. K. Linton's store, except that after my time it became a farmers' cooperative, and after that it burned down and was physically replaced by a filling station. If it hadn't been for the Thing there would, of course, have been no need for a filling station.

It is just as easy to explain why the hotel went away as it is to explain why the J. K. Linton store, dissolved into ashes, the smoke of it rising into a clear sky full of images, went away. The hotel burned down. So did the stonesheds. But a store, a hotel, a stoneshed would grow again if the soil were fit for them. In 1898 it was fit for them. Later it wasn't.

If the roads had remained the way they were the afternoon Cousin Joanna and I jogged over them the store, the hotel and the stonesheds would also have remained. I was sure, on that particular afternoon with Cousin Joanna, that they always would. I was so sure that I didn't have to think about it.

The roads were measured by time, and time in 1898 went slowly. Cousin Joanna and I would have needed an hour, at least, to get to Barre by horse-drawn buggy, and perhaps another hour and a half to get back, since getting back was uphill.

Therefore Williamstown could have, and had to have, a hotel, several stores, three churches, and, if business seemed good, two or three granite-cutting sheds. Williamstown was an island in time as time was measured in 1898; and an island must provide itself with the necessities of life.

I am not sure that J. K. Linton and some of the other business men didn't think of Williamstown as a town with a dramatic future—perhaps a coming little city with maybe ten thousand inhabitants instead of just one thousand or so—a rival of Barre and Montpelier.

Certainly somebody with a sense of permanence must have built the newer houses on Construction Hill, at the northwest corner of the village. These houses were ugly boxes, in the square, uncompromising, late nineteenth-century Doric; but

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

somebody must have thought he could get out of them the money he had put into them.

Did he do this? I doubt it. The rents couldn't have been collected long enough before the decline began, and the Italians, Scots, and French Canadians moved away to what they hoped would be greener pastures. For what happened to Williamstown at first was not the ending of its importance as a trading center for the farmers; it was the departure of its cosmopolitan granite workers.

Some of this feeling I must have had, even then. I never liked the houses on Construction Hill. There was a grace that even shabbiness and lack of paint couldn't kill in most of our village dwellings, and in the farmhouses, too. Some of these houses were beautiful. I think the General E. Bass house was such, in the time when I knew it.

But Construction Hill, as I now realize, was like the instruction of a factory town into a mellow village. It was the worst thing the stonesheds did to Williamstown, just as the mingling of three and more races was the best thing. It would have been better to leave it in pasture, and let the cows graze and enjoy the view across the little valley, over the church steeples, to the near ridges.

6

How did Williamstown begin to wane from its high position? Was it dying, a little, in my time? What stabbed it harder—some quirk in the granite industry that shifted the movement of stone to Barre and Montpelier; or the weapon that struck at all the small towns from ocean to ocean, from border to border, the gasoline-driven Thing, the smooth highway, the consequent shrinking of the map, so that a market town every thirty miles, say, could take the place of a market town every ten miles or so?

I didn't see anything at all going on, during my time, that suggested the great changes that were to come. A boy of ten

R. L. DUFFUS

wouldn't—boys of ten are almost never philosophers, economists, sociologists, or historians.

I might have suspected an impermanence in the fact that my father sometimes ordered groceries from Ginter Bros. in Boston, and that it was possible to buy shucked oysters in J. K. Linton's store on certain days. We never ate these oysters raw: they were stewed or fried or scalloped, which may have been just as well considering the state of refrigeration at that time.

Now, it was plain that when Ginter Bros. and the oyster business came into the picture, Williamstown was no longer self-sufficient. But I didn't see this, and I am not sure that J. K. Linton did, either.

So there was Williamstown, and there was the year 1898. Our family began to disperse a little later, and that is too long a story for the present. I myself left Williamstown in 1901 to go to high school in Waterbury, Vermont, with kindly help from my aunt and maternal grandmother. That, too, is another story—there are so many other stories.

I turn back to that picture of the students of the Williamstown Graded School—sixty-five or seventy children, each one of them eager to live and be happy, each impeded one way or another in the attempt, some doomed to die young, some doomed—if that is the word—to live to a great old age.

The pains, the sorrows, the gladness, the ecstasies, the fears, the known and secret offenses of a Vermont country town in 1898: these are a part of the long pilgrimage of mankind; they are one with Athens and Rome, with Florence and Paris, with the aborigines of New Zealand and Australia; with all the past, all the present and all the future. But we did not know this then, and especially a boy ten years old did not know it.

Since this is a guided tour of Williamstown as it seemed to a ten-year-old boy in the year 1898, I propose now to explore again, briefly, and finally, this vanished dominion.

This is a high valley among the hills, where the Indians long ago raised corn. It is so wide a valley, by Vermont standards,

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

that we were not crowded in it. But the hills were there, and we were cradled in them.

If I went upstream from the General E. Bass house, I had the lovely brick building of the Sibley farm on my left, with its attendant barns and the meadows stretching level for I suppose a quarter mile or so. On my right would be Mr. Ainsworth's meadows, not much used at that time except for producing hay. As I neared the Pool Bridge, where the brook crossed the road, I might see marshes on either hand if it were spring or early in a rainy fall. There was a modern house or maybe two such on the Sibley side and a stone wall on the Ainsworth side. Once, on that stone wall, not far from the bridge, I saw a stone covered with light green moss of a strangely lovely shade; but when I bent to admire this stone, it was not a stone at all but a snake that swiftly uncoiled and slid away. I drew back alarmed, but I still recall the beauty as well as the fear.

The Pool Bridge was overhung with willows. The nature of the stream underneath changed from year to year as the sand migrated upstream or downstream; I never knew why. Daice swam in it, and suckers lingered patiently for the baited hook, knowing perhaps that few cared to bother catching them, but hoping to be appreciated and compared with trout, once they were in the frying pan.

The bridge had a sort of bulwark on each side covered with corrugated iron and overhanging a little. I used to cross this bulwark, on the outer side, hanging by my hands. Other boys weren't all courageous enough to do this, and after a while I wasn't, either. Where did all that valor go, I wonder, when I needed it in later years?

After one crossed the bridge, the village began. On the left there was a sort of tenement building, two stories high, with verandas, painted in a dark brown, gloomy in winter but pleasantly cool in summer. Beside this tenement there ran a short road, with two or three houses on it. In one of these houses lived Millicent Byrnes.

R. L. DUFFUS

Beyond, on the left, was the schoolhouse, a squared-off structure with no architectural pretensions whatever. On the right, almost opposite, lived Mr. and Mrs. Liberty Jeffords, a respected elderly couple to whom I sometimes spoke when Mrs. Jeffords consented to bake some loaves of bread for the Duffus family. These smelled so good I almost ate them up on my way home.

Further along, and still on the right, was the Linton residence —a happy, comfortable place during J. K.'s good days. I remember it in brown paint, and I suspect it wasn't one of the oldest houses in the village. The last time I saw it the paint was peeling badly, and my heart ached a little.

On my way upstream I came to many houses and other structures which had meaning for me. There were George Beckett's harness shop and his new house, and the older house on the back of the lot where we lived for a while later on; there was the Edison Girls' brick house on the left; there were, in succession, on the left, the Town Hall, the Universalist Church, the Congregationalist Church, and the Methodist Church; there were, on the right, the stores, beginning with modest establishments run by Mr. Brockway, an elderly man with a short beard and a quiet disposition. I don't now see how Mr. Brockway made his living; and maybe he didn't, maybe he only thought he did. His stock was crowded higgledy-piggledy into a rather small, dark room; he had a pronounced lack of enthusiasm about everything; and though he was polite in a melancholy sort of way I never saw many persons in his store, or heard the sort of conversation audible in J. K. Linton's establishment which was so educational to young boys.

Beyond Mr. Brockway's store, still on the right, was the meat market, where Ben Weaver would sell you a steak for twenty-five cents, but it would be a good steak; and maybe he would give a boy a slice of bologna free.

Then one came to the Linton store, the Monument House, the Martin drug store, and Seaver's general store, which I think sold clothes, furniture, and various odds and ends, and must

WILLIAMSTOWN BRANCH

have competed in some respects with J. K. Linton's establishment. And there were the three churches on the left.

By this time one would be about at the bridge, the upper bridge, with I forget what on the right side and the blacksmith shop on the left side. On the far side of the bridge a road led up to the box factory and then into farm country. I think there was a cheese factory, too; perhaps at that time, or a little earlier, they had put the cheese in boxes and shipped it out.

The road, or street, that one followed if one didn't care to visit the box factory or the cheese factory pursued its way between two scattered rows of houses, two of which—Dr. Watson's and the Congregational parsonage—had especially friendly associations for me; and in another lived Jim Nutting, my excellent companion.

On the right was the cemetery, where lay not only the fathers and mothers of our hamlet and some of the soldiers who had been brought home from Civil War battlefields, but also Peter McAndrew and Anna Marie Sylvester, and a few of my own generation, among them Richard Linton, and Archie Staples.

On such a tour of our village I would avoid the road to Barre, which kept straight ahead, and swing right toward Mill Village. The sawmill and the gristmill might engage me for a few minutes, and then I would swing right some more, past a wood-working shop above the mill dam. This shop was often worth looking into, and smelled better than any perfume except possibly new-mown hay and some scents of cooking.

There were a few modest houses beside the stream; these, I believe, belonged to French Canadian "lumpers" who worked in the stonesheds. I was a little afraid of the French Canadians, I can't recall why. They were, in general, I now realize, the best-natured of men; and when they threatened to kill each other, they never intended to do so. But I hurried by, if I was alone.

Opposite these houses there was a farm, owned by I don't know who; what I remember of it now is the way it looked one fall—maybe the fall of 1898—when the field nearest the

R. L. DUFFUS

road had been planted to corn and pumpkins. I stole an ear of corn, which was hard chewing; but what I remember is the beauty of the yellow pumpkins among the brown stalks.

Our tour would now bring us around to the stonesheds and over another little bridge, whence one could look across the marsh and the meadow and see the General E. Bass house.

Then the railway station; and maybe, even after all this walking, it was still bright morning, and Old Man Webb would be at the throttle ready to take the train down the grade to Barre, and Jim Kennealy, the conductor, would be yelling, "B-o-a-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-d!" the way an old-fashioned conductor always did, as though two or three thousand people were waiting for the word.

I did not, as I said, leave Williamstown until 1901. Yet now it seems to be time to step aboard. It is time, after this tour of 1898, to say goodbye to that year. Jim Kennealy repeats his "B-o-a-r-r-r-r-r-d!" Old Man Webb pulls his throttle and blows his whistle and the fireman—ah, if only I could have been that fireman on at least one trip!—rings the bell frantically.

We are moving, gathering speed, down the grade to Barre and points north, south, east, and west. We are also headed toward the twentieth century. I look back with homesickness and forward with eagerness. Soon we are out of sight of Williamstown and the year 1898.

Cottonwoods Grow Tall

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON



AN ABRIDGEMENT

R. L. DUFFUS

road had been planted to corn and pumpkins. I stole an ear of corn, which was hard chewing; but what I remember is the beauty of the yellow pumpkins among the brown stalks.

Our tour would now bring us around to the stonesheds and over another little bridge, whence one could look across the marsh and the meadow and see the General E. Bass house.

Then the railway station; and maybe, even after all this walking, it was still bright morning, and Old Man Webb would be at the throttle ready to take the train down the grade to Barre, and Jim Kennealy, the conductor, would be yelling, "B-o-a-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-d!" the way an old-fashioned conductor always did, as though two or three thousand people were waiting for the word.

I did not, as I said, leave Williamstown until 1901. Yet now it seems to be time to step aboard. It is time, after this tour of 1898, to say goodbye to that year. Jim Kennealy repeats his "B-o-a-r-r-r-r-r-r-d!" Old Man Webb pulls his throttle and blows his whistle and the fireman—ah, if only I could have been that fireman on at least one trip!—rings the bell frantically.

We are moving, gathering speed, down the grade to Barre and points north, south, east, and west. We are also headed toward the twentieth century. I look back with homesickness and forward with eagerness. Soon we are out of sight of Williamstown and the year 1898.

Cottonwoods Grow Tall

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON



AN ABRIDGEMENT

The Author

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON is the granddaughter of Sam Houston who helped to carve out a nation and then changed it into the state of Texas. She graduated from St. Mary's College in Dallas, and then attended the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York. After her marriage, she settled in Texas, but has since lived in Virginia, New Orleans, Missouri, California, and is presently a resident of St. Petersburg, Florida.

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL
Margaret Bell Houston
Published by Crown Publishers, Inc.
© 1958 by Margaret Bell Houston

I REMEMBER THAT AFTERNOON. I can step back into it as actually as I can step out into the sunlight, seeing every leaf, hearing every sound.

Uncle Steve had ridden into town to be gone three days, and Aunt Rena had sent me to the dugout beyond the south corral to ask Zali, the schoolmaster's daughter, to spend the night with me. I loved Aunt Rena. People had not begun to whisper then. After the whispering began I loved her still. I loved her better than I did Maam, my grandmother, who was the smartest woman in Texas, and who had hewn to a straight line all her life.

Aunt Rena didn't belong on a ranch. Even I could see that. Uncle Steve had brought her from Galveston where she was Serena Lyle, and just eighteen. I think he took her by storm, or maybe her mother persuaded her he was a good match. A fine-looking man, over six feet tall, not rangy or bowlegged like most of his cow-waddies, but straight as a gun barrel, slim of hip and lithe as a leopard. I am quoting Maam, his mother, who was smitten with language. Still, there are photographs that support her description. I once heard him alluded to as a cattle baron, and I thought, That suits him, never at that time having seen a baron. With his pearl-gray Stetson and fine horse—yes, I can understand Aunt Rena.

He was all too human, my Uncle Steve—generous out of his own enormous pride, yet possessive too. He would have given you his last dollar, but try to take something away from him! Cool, quiet, honorable, dangerous.

Galveston on its little island was a dream city before the great storm of 1900. It had gaiety and good music, beautiful houses, and streets lined with oleanders, miles and miles of

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

hard white beach. Aunt Rena used to talk about it to Don, her son, and to me, Heather, his cousin. She gave me a mirror wreathed in sea shells she had gathered as a child, in the days when she had watched the big ships come and go, and played in the wake of breakers tall as a man.

Don had seen the ocean, but he couldn't remember it.

"The prairies—they are like it," said Aunt Rena with a far-away look in her long green eyes.

But nothing on the ranch was like her home, which had had French windows and prism-hung chandeliers, and on the lawn orange and lemon trees and Cape jasmines and roses along white shell paths. She had lived with her widowed mother, and there had been parties and beach picnics and dances at the Garten Verein, and many beaux. There hadn't seemed any world but that till Uncle Steve, on a brief holiday, came riding in.

He must have loved her very much, for before he went back to claim his bride he had got workmen out from the county seat twenty miles away and installed the porcelain bathtub bought years before and marooned on the back gallery as a repository for potatoes. Indeed, he had a bathroom fully equipped to greet his bride, a wonder that impressed her hardly at all, and that he had never provided for his mother, though it was she who had thought of the bathtub in the first place.

Aunt Rena brought trunks of foolish clothes to the ranch, dresses for afternoon and evening, peignoirs and dainty underwear, bonnets and shoes and clocked stockings. She hadn't bought them specially for her trousseau—except the white-satin wedding gown; they were just the clothes she had been wearing, and were useful at first when she went back to Galveston. When I was eight or nine she used to let me and June Willoby dress up in them—sashes and bustles and bonnet strings—but we couldn't touch the wedding dress. That was packed away in cloves against the day I should be married, myself. Then I might wear it.

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

She really thought of me as her daughter, and no wonder. I had been handed over to her on the day that I was born. Her face was the first thing I knew as I lay in Don's newly-abandoned cradle.

Yes, the clothes had been useful when she went back to Galveston, as she often did at first to visit her mother and her sister Juliet, whose husband, Park Avery, operated a line of fruit boats between Texas and Guatemala. After their mother's death Juliet came instead to visit Aunt Rena at the ranch. I don't think she cared for it much, but her small son, Stanard, never wanted to leave. He was seven when I was born, and by that time he was spending every summer at the ranch. If Juliet didn't come his father brought him. Pretty soon they put him on the train and let him come by himself.

Aunt Julie, as they taught me to call her, was older than Aunt Rena, and not like her at all except when she smiled. Then her face broke up into humorous twinklings, and you saw the resemblance.

Aunt Rena and Aunt Julie were very close. When Aunt Julie was coming Aunt Rena used to count the days. Then they would both seem happy, intimate, full of things to tell each other. Aunt Julie would stay for weeks after Uncle Park had gone back to his fruit boats, even though she always arrived during a hiatus in cooks.

It would have been hard to escape such a hiatus, since they were the rule. At these times it was the business of Maam and Aunt Rena to keep the home fires burning in the big kitchen range, which devoured loads of mesquite and juniper as fast as they were cut. Aunt Julie used to help in the kitchen when she came, and Aunt Rena was delighted. Aunt Rena was delighted with any help at all.

* * * *

MAAM DROPPED out in time and I took her place. We baked a dozen loaves of bread three times a week, and six dozen biscuits to a meal. The enormous coffeepot was always



MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

hot, beans and rice simmered constantly in the huge black kettles. There were the cowboys, of course, and the family and, almost always, company. Anybody who came could be sure of a meal.

I was six when Maam first decided I should learn to deal with the hiatuses between cooks. She bought me a broom I could lift and watched me while I swept. Then she stood me on a box at the zinc-covered kitchen table and set me to making bread. Brooms were clumsy and had a will of their own, but I liked walloping the great lump of dough, punching and pounding it and hearing it squeak.

My pleasure abated with repetition, but Maam was firm. This effete third generation wrung no tears from her. She had made bread herself a thousand times, and with no range oven to bake it in, only a stick-and-dirt fireplace with its rock back to throw off heat and its fire started by flint or punk, or a chunk borrowed from a neighbor miles away. "No lamps, just candles which we made ourselves. Made our own soap, of course. Made our horses' collars out of corn shucks. Dried the skins of animals to make our shoes. Quilted and spun."

It was heroic, I knew, but I liked better hearing Aunt Rena tell about Galveston.

Heroic. The word never occurred to Maam or her kind. Theirs was merely the homesteader's life back in the sixties. Maam's husband went off to war, and Maam stayed on at the farm, as we still call the oldest part of the ranch. She plowed and pitched hay, tended her cow and her few knotty hogs, her chickens and burro and peg-horn yoke of half-broken oxen. Maam's husband was my grandfather, of course, but I never knew him. He was killed at Shiloh. Uncle Steve was small then, and Charlie, my father, was smaller. Then there was Elizabeth, the baby.

At night, all too close, they heard the wolves, their long, lean howl, and the short, stabbing bark of the coyotes. Wildcats preyed on the chickens, and wolves ate the rump off the burro, leaving it to die. Once a panther prowled about the cabin all

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

night. With the first ray of dawn Maam got the rifle and fired, missing, but scaring him away. She learned in time to shoot as straight as a man, and brought home antelope and quail. Elizabeth, the baby, sickened and died, and Maam, alone, isolated by floods, made the coffin herself and buried the child.

People lent Maam money and charged no interest because she was a widow. Neighbors cut her grain and rebuilt her barn when it was struck by lightning. If there was a stray unbranded calf they brought it to her. There was no school then, and Maam, who in East Texas had been a schoolteacher, found time to tutor her sons and any other child whose family could send or bring it.

Her small farm widened into the Cottonwoods Ranch, and prospered. It became her practice to buy any land that bordered her own, so that Uncle Steve predicted she would own the world if she lived long enough. She did own a considerable part of the earth and its cattle before she died.

She was of Scotch descent, and she never let you forget it. A MacDonald of the Clan Donald, in a straight line from Conn of a Hundred Fights, by way of Eochaid Duibhlein, who married a Scottish princess, Aileach, daughter of the King of Alba.

I think Maam considered herself like Aileach, leaving her comfortable home and trekking into the wilderness with Grandfather. It seemed to me that if she harked back to any ancestor, it was to Conn of a Hundred Fights. Maam's fights made history as her farm spread into a ranch while ranches were still new in Texas; fights with cutthroats and cattle thieves, wild beasts and Indians, blizzards, pestilence, drouth.

* * * *

A MAN, they say, is an omnibus in which all his ancestors ride. Naturally, Maam's ancestors were mine too, but as happens with later generations, my omnibus is more crowded than hers. There were the Roys, of whom I knew very little because I never knew Grandfather, except indeed by the walnut trees he planted, and the log house he built—puncheon floor, rafters

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

fastened with green rawhide ("Mexican iron") in place of nails, and clapboards chinked with mudcat. A good house still.

Then there was my mother who came here a stranger. Most of all there was Charlie, my father, whom no one mentioned now. Years ago he had left home to join with outlaws who in those days poured into Texas from everywhere. No one told me this. I knew only from chance words let fall. My father might be in prison by now, or hanged as a bandit. Maam told me only about his courtship of my mother, if it could be called a courtship.

She was Oona O'Faolain, and a governess at the Willoby Ranch. When I asked what she looked like, Maam always spoke of her hair. "Thick and corn-gold."

"Heather's hair is just brown," said Don.

"Yes, and a good thing it is," said Maam. "People used to stare at Oona. Gold hair stirs something primitive in men. I think Eve, the mother of us all, must have been a blonde. I don't mean that was all Oona had. She was a very pretty girl, and I liked to hear her laugh. When she first came among us, I mean. Charlie was in love with her from the start."

The terrible thing that happened to Oona began at a moonlight picnic down by the canyon. After supper some of the girls went back into the woods. All of a sudden they came rushing out, screaming that Indians had taken Oona, had sprung from behind bushes and grabbed her and ridden away.

All night the men searched for her, all next day. Then Charlie left the posse and rode off on his own. He knew the way of fleeing Indians, how as soon as they think they are out of reach they stop and rest.

Three nights later when there was a fitful moon, he saw smoke rising from a grove. There they were—Comanches—feasting after a hunt. He rode close, dropped from his horse, and crawled through the brush like a snake. At first all he could see was Indians around a campfire; then the moon came from behind a cloud and showed him Oona, only a few feet away, lashed naked to a tree.

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

He crawled to her, hidden by the brush, and kneeling there, began to cut the thongs that bound her. They were both quiet as death, but the Indians heard. He fired into their midst and they fell back. Lifting Oona to his horse, he was out into the dark before they could mount and follow. At a creek and a clump of mesquite he hid to wait till the moon went down.

Oona had fainted, and he bathed her face till she came to. He had spread his saddle blanket for her to lie on, rolled his chaps into a pillow. He laid his shirt over her. Her body was too hurt and bruised for him to try to put it on her.

Morning came, and while she slept he caught frogs and crawfish out of the creek for their breakfast. She was awake when he built the fire, had put on the shirt. It covered her, for she was a little thing. She had been delirious in the night. Now she seemed in her right mind, but wouldn't talk to him; she just lay with her face buried in her arm. Sometimes she cried.

But she ate, and Charlie combed her long hair with his pocket comb, braiding it so it wouldn't tangle there in the brush. Later she was able to bathe in the creek while he gathered sticks for their midday fire, scanning the prairies for Indians. It was pain for even water to touch her body, and Charlie carried her like a baby when they rode.

Always they rode at night, following the creek, stopping at the later and later moonrise to hide and camp. Charlie killed rabbit and quail and they had meat. Once they stayed long enough for the rabbitskins to dry, and he made moccasins for Oona's feet.

Charlie brought Oona to his own house because it was the closest, and Maam put her to bed in the room upstairs. During the days that followed she never spoke except to thank Maam for her vigils and her kindnesses. Charlie would sit by her bed, quiet as she. Maam said that sometimes he would sit there all afternoon, with no sound from either of them.

The Willobys had brought Oona's clothes, and one day when Charlie was with her she got out of bed and he helped her

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

dress. In a little while the preacher came and they were married. Maam gave them the upstairs room, and she said you would never have known there was anyone in it.

Oona was never strong again, but after a time Charlie got her downstairs and she began to mingle with the rest. A year later I was born. She died then, and Charlie left home.

* * * *

I WAS thinking of these things as I rode my pinto pony toward the dugout. In two months I would be sixteen.

I drew rein and looked ahead, saw the ranch rolling away under its cactus and gray-green chaparral, with here and there the plume of a mesquite tree, a patch of goldenrod. Yonder was the creek, which sometimes went dry and sometimes overflowed its banks, and a mile to the right was Wallapoo Canyon. Straight ahead was a long, dark, sawtoothed line that we called the Ridge.

It was early in the afternoon. The juniper bushes still stood in their own shadows and the heat rippled like water above the grass. No cloud in the vast blue sky, no breeze anywhere, though whirlwinds rose unaccountably in the dust of the road, spiraling, scuttling over the cracks in the thirsty ground.

This was the weather for mirages, though there was none today. Always the mirage I saw was a waterfall among green leaves, like the one that came in the canyon when there had been rain, only big, like a river going over a mountain cliff. Aunt Rena always saw a regatta, white sails flying across blue waves. Don more than once had seen a lake, frozen over, with what must have been igloos beside it.

Each, riding alone, had seen his own mirage, yet the same—water. The cry of the plains is “Water . . . Water!” Is it that we see what we desire?

I rode on to the dugout, sitting astride like a boy. Two years before, Maam had forbidden me to ride cross-saddle. She said that in my skimp dress it exposed my drawers. So I had tucked up my drawers till only a stretch of thigh was visible.

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

This didn't satisfy Maam, who amid all her hundred fights had kept her staunch propriety.

So I rode straddle only now when alone. Came the human element into the landscape, I switched over. It was good this way. You felt much more the master of your horse, and at the moment you could relax with no other moving thing in sight.

So I rode at ease on this August day of 1900, taking the trail to the dugout, and thinking how the prairies reminded Aunt Rena of the sea.

* * * *

ZALI DUVAL and her father sat outside the dugout in the shade of a Chinese umbrella tree. They were just finishing their lunch, and called to me to join them.

The dugout was a hollowed-out hill, and there was a front wall of logs with a door cut in it, and a window. The roof too was of logs, under a mound of sod. Over the door a tarpaulin had been stretched like the roof of a porch, and near the umbrella tree were a small brick cook stove and a barbecue pit. Over at the right stood a shed for the horses, the teacher's tall bay and Zali's gentle little roan that whinnied as I rode by on Piper.

They all seemed glad to see me, Zali smiling her quiet smile. She was six months older than I, dark like her father. He was a man of puzzling contradictions, charming and agreeable when he called or dined at the ranch house; strict, even formidable, at school, taking no foolishness, yet quite above using the rod. He had come to the open prairies for Zali's health, and though she had joined him only last spring, he believed that the dugout and the intimate contact it afforded with the earth had already strengthened her.

We could hardly believe our good luck when Mr. Duval arrived that fall from San Antonio. Uncle Steve had offered him quarters in the bunkhouse, but the new teacher was at work on a book, an advanced history of Texas to be used in the state's schools, and he desired quiet, which he correctly

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

feared would not be found among the cowboys. Also he was expecting Zali. (He pronounced it to rhyme with holly.)

He asked about the dugout and its rent.

Renting the dugout was a joke to Uncle Steve. It had been built as a storm shelter, he explained, and for use when company boiled over. He gave them the dugout, as he had given them the horses, for as long as they would stay, and as head of the school board, he hoped they would stay forever. Until then we had had only women teachers, and none of them had shown up for a second year. Many of us were only half tame, and sometimes one of the boys would shoot up the place. Mexican and nester children, a few young half-breed Indians, and the scions of cattlemen and cowpokes, we were a motley and unwieldy group. However, there hadn't been any shooting since Mr. Duval came. In fact, a strange decorum prevailed.

I gave Zali Aunt Rena's message—that we wanted her to spend the night with us, tomorrow night too, if she would, and the next. She glanced at her father, and you noticed that while she had his coloring, her features were not like his. Her eyes were darker, larger, really enormous eyes, and her small tilted nose and round mouth were set in a wax-pale triangular face that seemed never to tan or freckle. She wore her black hair parted in the center and drawn smoothly over her ears into a low knot. She was different from anyone I had ever seen—exotic, probably. I thought her queer-looking. I had observed, however, that she worked a sort of spell on the waddies.

Her father said that she might come, and I slid down and went inside with her. The dugout was cool, as always in summer. Its dirt floor had been trodden hard, and there were rag rugs on it, and the skin of a mountain lion Uncle Steve had shot. In the front room was a wood stove that you could cook on, a table, a few chairs, a cot that had been put there for Zali, and a trunk that was Zali's too. There were books on the table, and a box of books in the corner.

Zali took a dress out of the trunk, a kimono and nightgown, stockings and slippers and fresh underthings, folding them into a small satchel.

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

Mr. Duval had brought and saddled her pony by the time we came back outside, and now, he knelt that she might step into his hand and mount. He did the same for me, and I sprang up, ladylike.

I looked back as we cantered off. Standing under the tarpaulin, he waved to us.

* * * *

OURS WAS a long supper table with seldom less than twelve around it, and sometimes twenty. Along its reach of red-checkered cloth sat two glass butter-dishes, two pitchers of molasses, and two pewter casters, each with its hard-pressed catchup bottle. Aunt Rena and I were doing the cooking and serving, the Chinese cook we'd had all spring having left us for the city lights a month before. Aunt Rena had on a short-sleeved green dress and a big white apron. She looked dreamy and abstracted as we carried in the big dishes of roast beef, of beans and rice and baked potatoes, of hog jowl and greens, and of stewed tomatoes, the platters of corn bread and light bread and biscuits, and the pot of strong, black coffee.

At last we took off our aprons and sat down.

The company tonight included two girls from town, driving with Dave Willoby to the Willoby Ranch. There were also Doc Weaver, our veterinarian, and Wig, a lonely old man, bearded like Santa Claus. We called him Wig because he went about the hills with a wigglestick, looking for signs of oil. He spoke of his stick as a divining rod, and he had cut it from a willow down by the creek.

Several of the boys were missing tonight, but Scotty was on hand, and Ticker and Bunch. Also Juan Trinidad (Trink), the soft-spoken Mexican boy who had come up from the King Ranch down in the Brasada or Brush Country. That's where chaps are called leggin's, and a roundup is a cow hunt, and the waddies wear *barbequejos* or chin straps on their sombreros. Stanard Avery was there, Aunt Rena's nephew from Galveston, Julie's son. Of course we couldn't claim Stan as a Cottonwoods waddy, but he was the same as one when he was with us. Don

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

sat in his father's place, facing Maam down at the other end. Beside him sat Zali in her freshly pressed white dress, with Stan on her other side.

The talk was lively and all mixed up. I could hear Homer Crimp arguing with Doc Weaver about blackleg serum (as if he knew). Homer was what is known as a chuck-line rider, a guest, that is—often an idle cowboy—who has worn out his welcome at the various outfits. I used to wish he would peddle something as he went about. A grip full of candy or gewgaws might have taken the curse off. But no, all Homer brought was his lean, lantern-jawed face, his contrary opinions, and what he lacked in accuracy he made up in positiveness. He seemed afraid of Uncle Steve and seldom came when he was there, but he admired Aunt Rena, used to stare at her furtively and, I thought, greedily.

I could hear him now, clinching his discussion with Doc Weaver in customary language. "I tell you *I know.*"

The town girls were laughing over something Stan had said. Scotty announced he'd been up the river, fishing.

"Catch anything?" somebody asked.

"Nothin' but an eel," said Scotty.

"Are eels fish?" asked Kelsie Puckett, one of the town girls. Scotty said they were.

Homer turned on him, shouted emphatically, "Eels are *not* fish."

"Sorry," said Scotty. "I didn't know any of the family was present."

The hilarity that followed annoyed Homer. He slid his furtive glance toward Aunt Rena, who was laughing with the rest. We all got up then, and the boys pulled the table and chairs back against the wall. Ticker had his fiddle, and we were going to dance. Three girl visitors didn't happen every night.

I was standing beside Aunt Rena when Homer came over and asked her to be his partner in a Virginia reel. Her eyes were still laughing as she looked at him.

Aunt Rena explained to Homer that she wasn't dancing,

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

that Trink and Don had offered to help me with the dishes, and she was going to her room and rest. That had indeed been the arrangement, but Homer seemed to think it was only an excuse for not dancing with him. After she'd gone he rolled a cigarette and went out on the front gallery, sitting alone in the dark.

The sounds of fiddle music and Ticker's calling of the figures came to us in the kitchen, made the dishes go fast. We could hear the strains of "Old Dan Tucker," and "The Miller's Big Dog," and "Little Brown Jug." Everybody was out on the floor when we went back to the dining room, the ladies in the minority as always. Some of the boys had tied bandannas around their arms to indicate they played the role of girls. My return only worsened the situation, bringing with me, as I did, Don and Trink.

The boys grabbed me, swung me around. High heels pounded on the resounding floor.

Stan was dancing with Zali. He was slim and tall in the loose pongee shirt, the tight pants thrust into the embroidered boots.

Now Stan was dancing with me. How he could swing you!

"Where you been all day, honey? I've got news."

"News?" eagerly.

"All hands round!" shouted Ticker.

Then when we met again, "News, Stan?"

"I'm leaving Thursday," he said.

"That's not news. And do you have to remind me now?"

"I believe she cares. I honestly believe she cares."

"Of course I care. We all care."

"Ladies in the middle," shouted Ticker. "And gents hop around 'em."

Our rompings and stompings soon tired Zali. She went and sat in a corner beside old Wig, till the boys came and pulled her back into the dancing. Presently a delegation with bandannas tied on their arms filed out and returned with Aunt Rena. She came gaily and took her place in a quadrille. I saw Homer watching through the gallery window.

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

Aunt Rena glowed like a girl when she danced. She was a redhead, supple and slender. Her green eyes half closed when she laughed, and grew dark when she was angry or startled.

"Bow to your partners," shouted Ticker.

Bow to your partners and say good-by.
Gents act sad and ladies all cry.

Do-si-do.

It was the end of something, though I didn't know it then.

2

ZALI ALWAYS SHARED MY ROOM when she spent the night with me. This was at her father's request, because she was given to walking in her sleep, especially in a strange environment. There was evidence that she had walked in her sleep the first night she came, for next morning when we woke there were peaches in the bed. Zali enjoyed peaches, and the evening before she had eaten one from a bowl on the sitting-room table. She was embarrassed when she discovered them, and almost cried. "I always take something I covet," she said.

I had a hard time persuading her it was funny. Of course I didn't tell anybody, seeing how she felt.

My room, like all the other bedrooms except Uncle Steve and Aunt Rena's, opened on a jalousied hall. It was an odd house, but comfortable, built by an Englishman who used to hunt coyotes with a pack of hounds. He called his ranch the Tesuque, a three-syllabled Indian word meaning, "Cottonwoods grow tall." It was Maam's first purchase of land bordering her own. She took over the Tesuque brand, a T with a peak on top $\hat{\wedge}$ to represent a tree, presumably a cottonwood. Somehow with us the name slipped down into The Cottonwoods, and there it stayed.

The house was of limestone, built around a patio, and one story high except for a tall room, mostly windows, called the airdome. The airdome's roof was railed and flat, useful in the old days as a lookout. Towering cottonwoods led down the hill along each side of what we called the Street, spreading shade where shade was sorely needed.

On the Street was the bunkhouse where the cowboys slept. Next was the squat adobe house of Al Klepper, the foreman, and further along were storehouses, well and windmill, black-

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

smith shop, woodshed, stables and barns. Behind the ranch house was a wood where the creek began, and where in the spring Don and I gathered wild flowers, and in the fall, red and black haws, persimmons, mustang grapes, and pecans.

Long days full of sun. When rain came it was a different world. The rain-sound was good at first, was an answer to prayer, and snug in a corner, we would read again some old book from the shelves in the sitting room. Generally the rain, having started, lasted so long that the house became a prison and I left it to ride out alone, to call on Wig in his shack beside the canyon, or merely to go down the hill and visit with Mrs. Klepper, her father and her flock of children.

Mrs. Klepper's father was an oak-brown, leathery old man who kept his coffin in his room against the day he should need it. Said he didn't want to be waitin' around for it, the way folks had to do on ranches, didn't think it was decent.

Of course the coffin wasn't out where you could see it, and the old man could chant to his banjo in a way that was enlivening to a child on a rainy day. Then the old man had died on a visit to his son in El Paso, and didn't use the coffin after all. It was out in the barn, now and Zali, coming on it the last time she was here, had gone all to pieces.

No matter how gloomy, we blessed the rain. It felt like rain tonight, with everything so still and heat lightning in the west.

* * * *

ZALI FELL asleep while I was undressing. I looked at her lying there, her pale face swamped in her dark hair.

We were different. I knew this, and I looked in the glass to discover, if I could, the signs of this difference. They were many, and mostly in her favor. My hair was an undistinguished brown, but it curled, I reminded myself, and though my eyes were yellow like a cat's, my lashes were as dark as hers. My mouth, alas, was larger.

Zali had been reared in San Antonio, had known most of the boys in the school where her father taught, had had music and

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

dancing lessons, and gone to parties and plays, and studied French. I had lived all my life on the prairies, twenty miles from a town, five miles from a telephone. My friends were cows and cow waddies, ketch dogs and horses.

Zali was cultivated and I was wild—that was the difference.

Zali was a flower, and I was a weed.

* * * *

ZALI WOKE with an earache. I swam up from a pit of dreams to hear her moaning, to see her doubled up like a fist. I thought of the big Doctor Book on the sitting-room shelves, but Zali screamed at the mention of it. She couldn't wait. *Do something.* Alas, none of us had ever had earache.

I ran down the hall to Maam's door. Maam knew everything, and sometimes she lay awake, reading. Tonight her light was out. If wakened in the night she did not fall asleep again, so I ran on to Aunt Rena's room. It was the first in the long line of rooms that made that wing, and though like all the rest it had a window opening on the hall, its door let onto a narrow passage that separated it from the sitting room.

The night was warm, but Aunt Rena's door was closed. I knocked and opened it. The double bed where she and Uncle Steve slept was empty. I looked in the bathroom as I went back. She was nowhere. Puzzled, I hurried on to the room where the town girls were sleeping. Kelsie Puckett woke at once, said that a hot grape pressed into the aching ear would work magic. I had no grape to heat, so Martha Tolivar, waking too, suggested a hot-water bag against the ear.

Aunt Rena had a hot-water bag, but where? I grabbed a kimono as I went past my room, and flew down the hill to knock on Mrs. Klepper's door. She came at once, being geared to broken rest; said she always used a hot stove lid—wrapped of course—on the children's ears; if I would wait till she made a fire . . . It occurred to me that a small empty bottle—Yes, she had one. I took it and ran.

There was no moon, but cloudless nights were never dark

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

because of the stars. They hung large and close, and in their light I saw a woman's shape moving from the direction of the stables. Hardly more than a shadow, it sped across my path and vanished behind the ranch house.

In the kitchen I funnelled hot water from the big copper water tank into my bottle. As I went back I saw that Aunt Rena's door stood open now, as all our doors did on hot nights.

I wrapped the bottle of hot water in a handkerchief and put it under Zali's ear. After a while her sobbing stopped.

* * * *

BREAKFAST was early at the Cottonwoods. I was grinding coffee when Aunt Rena came into the kitchen later than usual. I told her about Zali's earache and added, "I tried to find you, but you weren't in your room."

"I was probably in the bathroom," she said. So I knew she didn't want anyone to know she had ridden out, and that it was no use to ask her where she had gone.

Before we put breakfast on the table she went in to see Zali, and told her to stay in bed. She liked Zali very much and for her birthday had made her a kimono, a garment just being discovered by American women. I think Maam felt the kimono should have been given to me, but its bright red was much better on Zali; besides, Aunt Rena was forever making me things, dresses and petticoats and shirtwaists. She had always sewed for me, was gifted that way, could take a commonplace hat I had bought in town and twist the ribbon or rearrange the flowers, and make something witty and becoming. Those were the things she enjoyed doing. She didn't like cooking, but that was the woman's end of the ranch business, so she did it.

Aunt Rena, during breakfast, took Zali's tray to her, and Stan motioned me to come and sit in Zali's vacant chair between him and Don. Maam became alert, watching me as I went. It seemed to me she disapproved of my sitting down right then. Or had her disapproval something to do with Stan? Any-

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

how, everything was on the table; I had nothing more to do. Besides, Stan was leaving on Thursday when Nate went in for supplies. I might not see much of him between now and then.

Stan asked me if I was going to pack his bag the way I always did.

I said of course, when did he want it packed?

Any time tomorrow—Wednesday, he said. He wasn't taking much, just his town clothes—like always.

"That means you're coming back," I said, for I had wondered about that. He was entering his father's office in the fall, would be an integral part of the Avery Shipping Company.

"Of course I'm coming back," he said. "Who can stop me?"

"But businessmen don't get long vacations—like school children, like college boys."

"Not long ones. But I'll come—maybe at Christmas."

"That'll be fine."

"And you won't forget my bag? Besides, I brought you something."

"*Brought* me something? Why haven't you given it to me?"

"Because I like gifts as good-bys better than as hellos. And it's nearer your birthday."

"Heather," said Maam, "Trink wants more coffee."

"No, no, Señora!" said Trink. "It doesn't matter."

"Bunch too," remarked Maam.

"I'll remember," I said to Stan as I rose.

I could hardly wait.

* * * *

DURING THE morning all the company except Zali went their separate ways. Maam, meeting me in the front hall, announced that she wished to see me in half an hour up in the airdome. The airdome was the theater of most homilies and untoward communications, and I asked what I had done. "Nothing that I know of," said Maam. "I was merely looking at you during breakfast. You are getting older by the minute, and I think I should talk with you."

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

The airdome was a big room, furnished with an iron bed, the inevitable washstand and mirror, a roller-top desk (because it served now as an office) and a few chairs. Oona and Charlie had lived in this room. I had been born in that bed, had also had measles in it, and during my convalescence Maam had made me bone up on all the schoolwork I had missed. I prickled with the memory of that dual affliction, and I thought of the times, the hours, that Don had been imprisoned here for some minor misdemeanor.

"Until you apologize," Aunt Rena would say as she left him. "Until you're sorry." And Maam would look grim, thinking the punishment all too mild for a red-blooded he-sinner. "Spare the rod and spoil the child," Maam would remark. But Aunt Rena couldn't have whipped anybody, least of all Don. If he had a pain she had one too. I think she suffered when she shut him in the airdome.

"Go on, be sorry," I'd beg through the keyhole. "It's so *easy*." And though I couldn't see him, I knew he was standing at a window looking darkly out on the prairie, hurt and furious, but not sorry.

Quiet and abstracted as he grew older, with a dreaming look in his dark eyes, Don was a disappointment to his father because he showed no interest in the ranch. He seemed not to know one cow from another. Stan, having little of Don's training, outshone him as a rider, and as a judge of stock. I think the contrast nettled Uncle Steve.

Once Don and I were riding out under a sunset that filled the whole sky. Even the east beyond the Ridge burned like a fire. Don said in the low voice like his father's, like the voices of all those who live much outdoors, "Someday I'm going to ride across the Ridge, and on and on. . . ."

He sat looking at the saw-toothed barrier between us and the horizon, and I knew the ranch was not his world. I knew that someday he would ride away, searching for whatever world was his.

It was about this time that Maam gave him the trombone.

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

She said he acted as if he might be musically inclined. A book of lessons came with the trombone, and from his room across the patio you could sometimes hear him tootling.

The sound was lonely and mournful, especially at night.

* * * *

MAAM SAT with me on the window seat. She asked me if I ever thought of the future. I said, "Sometimes."

"Well," chin up as she contemplated me, "what are your thoughts?" Then, after a pause during which I ruminated, "Do you ever consider what you would like to do, if anything? Would you like to go away to school?" she asked.

I knew she expected me to say yes, but I liked the ranch school since Mr. Duval had come, and I told her so.

Maam said that she could understand this, but that she had in mind a boarding school, Sevier College, in San Antonio. "Mr. Duval is going to send Zali there in a year, and you won't be ready for a year either. Of course you're as good as sixteen, but I didn't realize it till this morning. As for Don, I've always intended he should go to the University at Austin."

That would be next year too, she added. This year she merely wanted us to keep her plans in mind, and to take full advantage of Mr. Duval's teaching.

"I was not able to do this for my sons, but I can do it for my grandchildren. Naturally, it has its dangers. Don may not come back to the ranch. I feel more sure of you."

I said of course I would come back and live on the ranch.

"You have your father's share in it," said Maam. "You must fill your father's place."

"That is a debt," said Maam, "that you owe the ranch."

And she began to talk about Charlie, my father. She said it was not enough that I return to the ranch and continue to make it my home. That alone would not pay Charlie's debt.

"You acknowledge that debt, don't you?"

I said that I did. Anyone could see of course that Charlie had left things in the lurch, that Maam, with only one son, had

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

had a harder time than she might have had with two. What I didn't see was how I could take a man's place, pay a man's debt. Still, Maam herself had taken a man's place for years, and raised her children too.

I said I would do what I could.

Maam said, "Would you marry Don?"

So that was it. Well, marrying Don might be the easiest of the labors to which as Charlie's deputy I might fall heir. But how could it pay my father's debt?

Maam was talking about Don, giving me time to think, to get used to the idea. Don, she said, was not a musician, but a poet. "Let's put it loosely, and call him a writer. Mr. Duval says he has a valid talent. He discovered it in some translations of Virgil the boy made. In some way Mr. Duval has been able to get at Don, to find out what he's interested in. It's writing."

Maam added that she hadn't taken the news seriously at first, since all Texans wrote poetry. "When we're young, at any rate, due to our epic and romantic past. I thought it would be just a phase with Don. But Mr. Duval read me a poem Don had written, a ballad like those of the old minstrels, back in the beginning when poetry was itself. I had to change my mind.

"I'm not saying anything to your Uncle Steve about this. He had no sympathy whatever with the trombone. I think I'll let Mr. Duval tell him. He has great respect for Mr. Duval, and the history he's writing. Steve can't, though he should try till doomsday, make a rancher out of Don. Don must find himself. I believe Duval can make Steve understand this. . . Do you understand, Heather?"

"I think I do," I said. I wondered if Aunt Rena knew about Don. I felt that Maam should be talking with Aunt Rena instead of with me. But of course she was asking me to marry Don. How would Aunt Rena feel about *that*? And how would Don feel? Or had he agreed already?

"I know," said Maam, "that a man must follow his own bent. I know too that men must be managed. Perhaps we women

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

have kept that fact a secret among ourselves, for men don't know they must be managed. At any rate, they don't manage one another. And all wives don't do it. Your Aunt Rena doesn't manage your Uncle Steve. As far as I can see, she doesn't even try. And speaking of wives, did you know Mr. Duval's wife was an actress, a dancer, when he met her? She was Polish-French, I think—came over with some ballet troupe dancing at the Jack Harris Theater, there in San Antonio. Couldn't speak English when they married. That's where Zali gets her odd foreign look.

"I sent for Mr. Duval one day last week, and we had a good talk about Don. Mr. Duval is a scholar, cultured and traveled. I think they must have had money at one time. It's a godsend that he should be here on the prairie teaching you children, able to see what Don is when Don hardly knows, himself. Don must come back to the ranch when he finishes at the University. He could write better here than anywhere else, and with the right wife to look after his interests when Steve and I are gone, there's no reason he shouldn't write.

"I have built the Cottonwoods into a kingdom. In spite of himself, in spite of anyone. Don must take his place in it. Don wants to wander, to be at loose ends. He has all the instincts of a tramp. The prairie does that. It makes rovers, just as living by the sea makes sailors. If Don's going to write I suppose he should not be tied down. But every human being must have a base, and in Don's case there should be a magnet to draw him back to it. A wife—the right wife and a family—would do that, would be a steady influence. I feel very strongly about this."

To travel, to wander. Either would be good, I thought, though I was not a writer. Always—perhaps it was Aunt Rena's talking about it—I had wanted to see the ocean.

Don would go wandering while I stayed home. But wasn't that what women on ranches always did? Weren't they always in the kitchen when the men rode out?

I asked Maam if she had talked with Don, and she said no,

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

she had felt it best to speak first to me. She added that I was not to mention the matter to anyone at present, even to Don.

I said that I wouldn't, especially to Don.

"Some people will tell you," said Maam, "that it is wrong for first cousins to marry. This is not true, for the Bible says nothing against it. You and Don are congenial and fond of each other, aren't you?"

"Why, yes, I love Don, and I suppose we're congenial. We don't fight much. But I doubt if he'll want to marry me. I can't promise for him."

"I'm not asking you to promise for Don. There's no income from poetry, and the profits from prose are very uncertain. Mr. Duval has talked with Don. Don knows that somebody will have to underwrite his wanderings. His father won't do it, and his mother can't, at least not for long."

The full import of this confidence did not strike me until afterward.

"Do you realize," said Maam, "that inheriting your father's half, and being married to Don, you will one day virtually own the Cottonwoods?"

That was a fact, and staggering, especially as I had never thought much about owning half.

Maam rose. We faced each other and she laid a hand on my shoulder. She had magnetic eyes of battleship-gray, an obstinate chin and a nose that I had heard more than once described as Roman. Now, at sixty-odd—none of us knew Maam's age—she was still a fine figure of a woman, still able to scheme, execute and rule. She had planned the marriage of her grandchildren as she had planned other matters during her career. It was the sensible thing, and she would see that it came to pass.

We seemed as we stood there to be entering into a pact. I felt the force of Maam's will as if I were swimming in its current. Silently she seemed to say, "You understand, Heather."

Gravely I said aloud, "I understand."

I really thought I understood.

3

AUNT RENA CAME IN after supper and left a bottle of drops for Zali's ear in case it should pain her in the night. I thought Aunt Rena looked pale, and I followed her back to her room, and told her not to bother with the supper dishes; I could get some of the boys to help me. She smiled and thanked me. I wanted to tell her about Maam's plan for Don and me, knowing she hadn't heard, or she would have mentioned it. Maam, however, had cautioned me to silence. And besides, Aunt Rena seemed strange tonight. She sat looking at me with her dark-lashed, green, half-smiling eyes, and I couldn't tell whether she was sad or happy, or if she saw me at all.

I went back to the dining room and found that the boys had cleared the table and stacked the dishes in the kitchen, making ready for a poker game. I feared there would be no volunteers for kitchen duty, but Ticker and Bunch came forward nobly. When the dishes were over we found Zali watching the poker game. She turned to Ticker, asking him to play his fiddle while she taught Don and Bunch to waltz.

We went into the big entrance hall that divided the dining and sitting rooms. Stan had taught me to waltz the summer before, so while Zali was busy with one of the boys, the other danced with me.

Don seemed abstracted when we danced together. Had Maam spoken to him? After a while he asked me to go out onto the gallery with him. However, we found Maam there gossiping with Mrs. Klepper. We went to the patio, but with its surrounding open jalousies, it was like a listening post, and Don led me along a path to the edge of the woods. In the starlight we sat down on a fallen tree just where the trail comes out of the woods from its far journey up among the hills.

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

Don said he thought we ought to talk over this notion of Maam's. "I don't imagine you've got your heart set on it," he added, "because if you have—Well, have you?"

"No. I wasn't at all certain you'd want to do it."

"Well, I didn't. Not at first. She may tell you about it, and I hope it doesn't hurt your feelings. I just had a hunch it would tie me down worse than I'm tied already."

"I don't think it will."

"Well, she explained that it wouldn't—just the opposite. And of course I'm used to you. I can see that in a way it would be a good thing. But what I want to know is this: Did she promise you things the way she promised me? . . . I believe the promises she made for you. She said you agreed to them, and I believe you'll be capable of holding up my end of the ranch, and leaving me free. I thought at first—and I told her so—that you could do this without our being—married. She said you might marry somebody else, and so might I. I never meant to get married, never thought about it. Did you?"

"No. Well, maybe. I'd like to have children."

"Of course. A woman needs that, I guess. . . . Well, did she? Did she promise things for me?"

No. As I recalled, Maam had merely asked me to pay my father's debt.

I said that Maam had made no promises.

"It's just as well," he answered. "They probably wouldn't be kept. I'm no good, and I think you ought to know it."

"I know you're not a cowman, if that's what you mean."

"A cowman? I'm a monster."

"I don't think so."

"You don't think so because you don't know. You don't know a darned thing about what's inside me—the snakes, the wolves, the God-knows-what. I've never told this to anybody, but it's right you should know."

I wondered if he were trying to scare me away, or perhaps merely to impress me, showing off. I looked at his worried face, and said, "Maybe marriage will quiet you down."

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

"I don't want to be quieted," he remarked. "You talk as if I had a fever or something. I hate everything I've ever known. I didn't say any of these things to Maam, but I'm saying 'em to you. I'm just *not here*. I'm somewhere out there, and I want to find myself. I want to ride till I get to the sea, and then I want to get on a ship and sail till I touch some island, and know that I don't have to stay there. And that's not temporary."

I said, "Someday you'll write the things you feel."

"Writing's no outlet," his low voice answered. "Maybe I'm not a real writer. Anyhow, there are moods I can't even think in, feelings that have nothing to do with words. I'd like to ride away right now for parts unknown."

"That's what my father did," I said. "He left a gap behind him."

"I know. I've often thought of Uncle Charlie. Why shouldn't he leave a gap, if he wanted to?"

"I don't know that he wanted to. He just did, and it was hard on everybody else. What I mean is, you won't leave a gap when you go, because you'll have me."

Someone was coming toward us through the woods. I recognized Max, the white horse that Stan had ridden all summer. Yes, it was Stan. We called out to him, and he stopped when he came abreast of us. Don asked him where he had been, and he said nowhere, he had just been riding. . . .

He rode on, and after a minute Don said, "Will you say again what you said just now—that last thing you said?"

I was trailing after Stan in my mind, thinking of his riding alone up in the hills. He must be upset or unhappy, perhaps because he was leaving Thursday. . . . But then he always leaves when the summer's over. He can't be sad over leaving, because he's coming back just the same. He promised.

Don was waiting. His words hung still in the air.

I thought suddenly how Zali must hate me for taking him away, leaving her with only Bunch.

"If we were married," I repeated, "you wouldn't leave a gap when you went, because you'd have me."

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

"You say that still," he said. "You say it in spite of what I've told you—about myself, I mean."

"I'm not afraid," I answered. "Like you say, I'm used to you. You're temperamental, but I think if you could travel—could wander—the way you want to—you'd—you'd find yourself."

"Then say it again, Heather—what you said."

I could see he wanted what Maam had planned for us.

I said it again—about his not leaving a gap—and after a moment's silence he laid his hand over mine.

"That's fine," he said.

* * * *

NO ONE was dancing when we went back to the house. Ticker and Bunch had joined the poker game. They said Zali's ear had begun to hurt, and she had gone to her room. I found her there in bed, her face hidden in the pillow. She wouldn't talk to me, but she let me put some of Aunt Rena's drops in her ear, and presently went off to sleep.

I didn't feel sleepy myself, but sat by the window in the dark, looking out on the late stars, thinking how my future had been suddenly laid bare.

Don had begun tooting in his room across the patio. The sound pierced the night, eerie, melancholy, the cry of something utterly alone. I wondered if it disturbed Stan, whose room was next to Don's. Stan's light was out. Perhaps he was asleep like Zali, who had not stirred.

My thoughts were gone, scattered. I laid my head on the window sill, aware only of the wail of the trombone. I must have slept, for after a time I realized the sound had stopped. There was only silence, the silence of the prairies, the silence of the stars.

I had a sense that someone had passed my door. In the stillness there had been no sound, but now I heard the door into the patio open and close softly.

I wondered if Aunt Rena were riding out again tonight. It was her own business where she went, but it was dangerous, the dark prairie and a woman riding alone. Perhaps she did it

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

often, and no one knew. It was only an accident that I had seen her last night when she came home. Panthers, bears, wolves were abroad at night. It was for these that Uncle Steve and the waddies carried guns. Aunt Rena had no gun—she was afraid of firearms. Someone armed to protect her should be riding near. Yet I couldn't send Don or one of the waddies to follow her—she didn't want anyone to know she had gone. She wouldn't want me to know, either, but I knew already.

In the dark I fastened on the pistol and holster I had owned since I was twelve. The boys were still at cards, I discovered as I went through the front hall and onto the gallery, where I stood facing the Street. In the starlight a mounted figure was leaving the stables. Piper was in the stable too. I ran fast. Mounting bareback, I followed horse and rider, keeping well behind, yet close enough to be of help if help were needed.

We didn't take the Street, but an uncharted way across the prairie. It might have been a shadow that I was following. Piper and I might have been shadows too, his hooves silent in the dying grass. We crossed a dry wash, passed the south corral, entered a familiar trail. Ahead of us the horse and rider moved faster, became a blur that merged now and then with an oak or a mesquite. And now they had reached the dugout, its window a pale square of light on the hill.

The door of the dugout opened. I saw the schoolmaster come out and lift Aunt Rena down. The two moved as one shape through the dugout door, and the door closed.

Silence. The silence of the earth, the silence of the stars. I waited a while as if I thought Aunt Rena might come out again, might need me on the dark ride home.

I turned and rode back. In bed beside Zali I lay awake a long time.

In the morning I told myself it had been a dream.

* * * *

THE DAY itself was like a dream. Aunt Rena and I going through the routine motions of getting breakfast, grinding the coffee, frying the bacon and eggs, making biscuits. The boys

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

coming and going. Clatter. Talk . . . Zali on her little roan pony, leaving for home.

Maam met me in the hall, bestowed on me one of her rare kisses. I was to remember, she said, that it was a secret.

What was a secret? Oh, yes, Don and I. Don might tell his parents, she said, but that was all.

"Have you told Zali?" she asked.

No. Perhaps if I had told Zali she would have understood my going off with Don last night. I realized it was this that had made her cool to me all morning. I had supposed vaguely it was the effects of the earache.

I sat alone in my room. Don might tell his parents, I reflected, but that was all. It occurred to me that Maam would have liked to keep our plans a secret from Uncle Steve, but could not ask this of Don. I could hear her giving Uncle Steve her own version: "There is a definite attraction between Heather and Don. I am encouraging it, for I feel it is a good thing."

With the information coming to him from Don, by way of Aunt Rena, he would probably never learn the full extent of Maam's encouragement, nor the provision it included for Don's wanderings. Were I allowed to chat freely here and there, all would soon be clear as crystal to Uncle Steve, and his own opinions would be heard. That would be bad, like an opposing wind at the start of a journey.

* * * *

DURING THE afternoon I went to Stan's room and found him packing his bag.

"I didn't know whether you'd come or not," he said.

He let me help him, but it was soon over. I sat down in the one chair, not wanting to go away again. The fog, the dream, had seemed to lift in Stan's presence, but I could not ease myself by telling him things, by talking with him. He was twenty-three, a man, a man about to go into business. He had never been in my world, was always too old for that. I had thought of him as wise and strong and afraid of nothing. We had ridden

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

together many times this summer, had talked together. Remembering this, I wished suddenly that I might talk with him now, might confide in him. But everything must be sealed inside me. Everything.

Stan sat down on the bed. He sat smiling, watching me, one knee clasped in his hands. His smile was like Aunt Rena's, mostly in his eyes, dark eyes, intensely blue. Dark hair, straight nose and clean-cut mouth and chin. Always when he left he was browner than when he came.

I realized he had been talking—talking about Max whom he had ridden all Summer. He'd like, he was saying, to have Max for keeps, to buy him. Strange talk. He'd have to see Uncle Steve about buying Max. Uncle Steve would of course say, "Why, take him, Stan."

"You're very quiet, Heather," Stan broke off. "I appreciate your coming in. I'd like to give you your present, just as I planned, but I'm not certain I should. I'm not sure I'd better."

The bag stood open on the bed, and he turned to it and took out a small white box.

"After all," he said, "it's yours. It was yours when I came."

He handed me the box and I opened it and lifted a layer of white cotton. It was a bracelet, a wide band of dull, hammered gold, encrusted with golden gems.

"Oh, Stan," I whispered, "what *are* they?"

"Topazes," he said. "Light topazes, the color of your eyes."

On the inside was engraved "H.R. from S.A." and the date of my coming birthday.

"Put it on," he said. "I want to see it on your arm."

I said, "It's beautiful. The most beautiful thing I ever had except the little silver heart you sent me one Valentine's."

"I remember. You must have been about eight."

"Yes. I wore it all the time."

"What became of it?"

"A cow ate it. Huldah, one of the milk cows. You remember how I used to hold their tails while Nate milked?"

No, laughing, he didn't remember that.

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

"Well, one day I leaned over Huldah's trough, and the heart slipped off its chain and fell down into the cottonseed, and I couldn't grab it in time. I never wanted you to know."

I laughed with him, able to see that it was funny, because now I had the bracelet.

He sat looking at me, the smile still in his eyes. "What will they teach you at school, Heather?"

"Oh, Stan, I don't know. Who told you I was going away to school?"

"Don't let them change you," he said. "Your grandmother told me yesterday afternoon."

Why did he say "your grandmother"? Why didn't he say "Maam" the way everybody did, the way he always had?

"It won't be for another year," I said.

"I know. And you'll stay two years, and then come back and marry Don."

I was furious. She had forbidden me to tell, and then had told it herself.

"It surprised me," said Stan. "Are you glad, Heather? Are you glad you're not free? If I thought—" He looked at me, decided I was glad. "Anyhow," he said, "you're too darned young."

I said, "I'll be older in three years."

"No doubt. Right now you're not old enough to know your own mind. Aunt Rena thinks otherwise, of course."

"Who told Aunt Rena?"

"Don told her. Both she and your grandmother think it's a perfect arrangement, especially for Don. He's the idol of them both, and he'll be soft as a puddle when they're through. I think Maam confuses him with her son, the one who ran away . . . Excuse me, Heather. I forgot that was your father." He went and stood by the window, looking out on the wood.

"That's all right," I said. "I don't mind."

I went out then and showed my bracelet to Maam, who was in the patio, and to Aunt Rena, who was about to start supper.

"Oh, yes, your birthday!" Aunt Rena said. "We'll have a big cake and sixteen candles."

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

UNCLE STEVE came back on Thursday, and the drowsing machinery of the ranch hummed again. It was as if a plug had been inserted and the circuit re-established. Sandy-haired, gray-eyed, brown as his saddle, he stretched his long legs under his own table again, listening to the foreman, to his mother and the cowboys, while Aunt Rena and I moved about on our hundred errands.

The boys filed out in time, leaving the family together. Stan went to get his bag and trappings, for Nate would be starting soon. Aunt Rena sat down in the vacant chair beside Uncle Steve.

"Guess who I saw in town," said Uncle Steve. He was looking at Aunt Rena, and you saw how he loved her, how glad he was to be home again after his three days away.

Aunt Rena couldn't guess.

"Miss Keezy," he said.

A scream went up from us both.

Keziah Hopkins had come to our parts after a year's correspondence with the foreman of the Sun-up Ranch. They had met in a Lonely Hearts column and agreed on matrimony. Miss Keezy had sent a picture of her very pleasant face, but when Miss Keezy's figure emerged from the train, the foreman had turned and fled, and nobody had seen him since. He made a mistake. Miss Keezy, though shaped like a silo, was an excellent cook. Her rabbit tamales alone should have won her a passport to paradise.

Stranded, she had looked for work, and so had come to us, had stayed two years, the closest thing to permanence our kitchen had known. A sister's death had called her home to care for three small children. Now, said Uncle Steve, the brother-in-law had remarried, and Miss Keezy was in town, waiting for a ride out to the Cottonwoods.

"Nate's picking her up today," Uncle Steve added.

It was still dark and the gallery lamps were lit along the wall. In their flickering light we gathered from bunkhouse, farm and stable to say good-by to Stan. That was our way when a favorite guest was leaving.

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

Stan smiled as always—yet not as always. He mounted with Nate to the seat of the big Studebaker wagon, having kissed us women all around. Dawn was just reddening the sky. I stayed on the gallery a long time, waving to Stan. The look on his face haunted me. An odd thought came: Will I ever see him again?

Aunt Rena always cried a little when Stan left. Today her eyes were dry because Miss Keezy was coming.

Uncle Steve smiled. "She felt sure you'd take her back," he said.

Take her back! We would have received her kneeling, if she had so desired.

* * * *

AUNT RENA was making herself a dress.

She made everything she wore. The ready-made garments which I so admired in the mail-order catalogues held no charm for her.

Our lives, of course, held few occasions calling for a new dress. The Literary Club (organized years before by Maam) met in the schoolhouse every second-Saturday night, and there would be occasional spelling bees and debates, or maybe a play by the school children. If Don or I figured in any of these activities the family would go. Then there was church, of course, and at long intervals, a dance. If you wanted to dress up for any of these you could, but Aunt Rena seldom bothered. However, I think she had had so many pretty things as a girl, had thought so much about clothes then, that she couldn't help thinking about them now. Then there was always the chance that we'd have a permanent cook and she'd get to visit Juliet in Galveston.

Maybe that was what she was planning now. Anyhow, here at the end of summer she opened her Singer sewing machine and set it humming over a gossamer, flowered voile. Uncle Steve said she wanted to impress Miss Keezy.

Don helped with the dishes and she was able to finish it

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

Saturday afternoon just before Nate returned from town. The sight of Miss Keezy heaving her vast bulk out of the wagon submerged all our excitement over the new dress.

Sunday morning I remembered it and went in to see if Aunt Rena was ready for church. There she stood before the mirror with something gold dangling from her hands as if she were about to fasten it around her neck. She had on the new dress, which was a pale pink scattered with lilacs, and a drooping leg-horn hat with a lilac bow. She looked beautiful. Her fingers had closed over the gold chain; then, seeing it was only me, she opened her hand and showed me a gold locket set with four stones. "Their initials spell my name," she said. "Ruby, emerald, nacre (that's pearl), amethyst."

I admired it. The catch yielded to my finger, and I saw there was no picture inside, only a lock of dark hair.

"I've had it a long time," she said, and shut the locket and put it inside a little drawer in the bureau.

"Aren't you going to wear it?" I asked.

"I never wear it," she answered, and locked the drawer and put her arms around me. Standing there in her embrace, I knew, as I had known all along, that last Tuesday night was not a dream. I felt afraid, as if something dark and terrible were drawing near.

"Dear Heather," she said. "I wish I had your youth. I wish I were just sixteen. . . To think that you and Don . . . Remember, I promised you my wedding gown. Come, we mustn't keep them waiting."

She stopped to pin up a curl of my hair, to arrange it more to her liking. We went out then, and climbed into the surrey with Maam and Uncle Steve.

* * * *

THE PREACHER had dinner with us that Sunday; so did Zali and her father. They were three people who often joined us after church because Maam worried about them. The preacher was a childless widower and she was certain he starved when

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

not invited out. As for the Duvals, they had assured her they could cook, but she had her doubts. Dr. Youree, the town physician, arrived during the meal, being on the way to the Willoby Ranch, where old man Willoby was down with dengue fever. Word had got around that Miss Keezy was back and every waddy was present, all slicked up and in his Sunday best.

The dinner disappointed nobody. Miss Keezy thought well of it herself; she was celebrating her own return, with supplies at the crest.

In a state of repletion, guests and family repaired to the sitting room. The Reverend Fanshaw had sat down beside Aunt Rena and was urging her, as he often did, to take a Sunday School class. He was convinced she would make a good teacher—Maam herself taught a class of grown people—but Aunt Rena was begging off, equally sure she could never teach anybody anything.

Dr. Youree lingered only long enough to accept a cigar; then he was on his way again. Uncle Steve, too, lit a cigar, but Mr. Duval got out a meerschaum pipe. I had sat down in a corner of the sofa and he came and settled himself beside me. He looked at me gravely as he pressed the tobacco into his pipe. It grew dark inside me, and I thought, he's going to talk about algebra. Still, I couldn't help seeing how good-looking he was, close up like this. A fine face, with a wide intellectual brow, and a pliant, sensuous mouth, which now was pressed about the pipe stem. His hazel eyes had flecks of brown in them.

"Enjoying your vacation, Heather?"

"Oh, yes!" In the pause that followed I asked correctly, "How's the history coming along?"

"Not very fast in the hot weather. I expect it to pick up in the fall."

He had an odd, amusing voice, ironic at times, and with a little break in it as if the surface were worn away in spots, and something plaintive came through.

"But school starts in the fall," I answered. "It must be hard to write and teach too."

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

"Well, sometimes it is. And since you've brought up the subject of school, have you done any work this summer on your algebra?"

I told him that I had worked some in June, and now that we had a cook—

He agreed that having a cook should help considerably.

Don, handsome in his Sunday suit, came across the room with Zali. They said everybody was going to sing hymns. Indeed, Maam had already seated herself on the piano stool, and Aunt Rena was placing the big hymn book on the music rack. Maam began to play "Bringing in the Sheaves," and Aunt Rena's warm contralto led off. Mr. Duval and I stood behind them and joined in.

Presently it was Uncle Steve's voice you heard above the rest, fine and vigorous, the way it was in church. I remember how straight he stood beside Aunt Rena, both of them singing, and how Maam turned around and made Zali and Don, sitting on the sofa, get up and sing too. Then she played "In the Sweet Bye and Bye."

Zali stood next to Uncle Steve, and as the singing broke up he said, "You're almost a stranger, Zali. Where have you been?"

"Right here," said Zali, "visiting Heather. You were away last time, too, when I was here. You're always away when I come."

"Does Heather need protection," inquired Uncle Steve, "or are you afraid of me that you come only when I'm gone?"

He was bantering, but Zali answered gravely, "I come when I'm invited."

He did not reply, and after the singing was over it was he who put away the hymn book and closed the piano.

The three men went out then to look at the new stallion.

4

THERE WAS A DANCE just before the fall roundup, which came early that year. School had not started, so Zali and I were allowed to go. I wore my white dotted swiss, my new bracelet, and my black patent-leather pumps that were beginning to be too small. Zali had let out the hem of her peacock-blue organdie and done her hair in a pompadour. She carried a shiny fan, and looked at least eighteen.

Zali's dress had not needed letting out, but mine did, and I hadn't thought about it. Besides that, my pumps hurt whenever I tried to dance. Zali wore silver slippers with French heels. I learned later they had been her mother's.

Benches and chairs had been ranged along the walls of the one-room schoolhouse. Kerosene lamps with bright tin reflectors shone in their wall brackets. Ticker was there with his fiddle to call the figures. Dave Willoby had his guitar, and Banty Sutton his mouth organ. Trink was on hand to rattle beans in a painted gourd. Almost every woman had brought a cake, and on a campfire outside the men were tending coffee in three-gallon pots.

All the boys from neighboring ranches were there, girls from town, cattle people, great and small. They say Ticker outdid himself with his calls. I do remember he looked rash and lively, and during the quadrilles the people on the floor did all sorts of crazy things while those along the wall laughed till they cried. I couldn't take it in well with my shoes hurting so and my dress so short and Maam saying I certainly *couldn't* take off my shoes until I retired from the room.

"I'm surprised at you, Heather."

The desks had been arranged in such a way as to shut off a corner of the room and make a place to set the cakes and

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

stack the coffee cups. I went behind that barricade and sat down and took off my pumps.

The ladies came presently, and I helped them slice the cakes and pour the coffee. There was a lull during refreshments; then, all of a sudden, everybody was begging Aunt Rena and Mr. Duval to do the Diamantina. That was a dance Aunt Rena had known as a girl and that none of us had ever seen till she and Mr. Duval had danced it at the roundup dance last fall. They had hardly known each other then, and they seemed hardly to know each other now. I had noticed it that Sunday at the house. They didn't sit together or talk together. Tonight Mr. Duval seemed to dance with everyone except Aunt Rena, though he was bound to touch her hand or bow to her in the Virginia reel or a quadrille. Now their friends were calling them out, compelling them to go onto the floor and face each other in the Diamantina.

They were a poised and gallant couple, the schoolmaster in his dark-blue urban suit, Aunt Rena in white, her red hair shining. Gliding, pausing, they would waltz a bit, then part, though their hands still held. There were flashes when, in a close embrace, they seemed one; moments when she turned away, seeming to escape, and, master of her every movement, he drew her back into his arms, while her filmy skirts swirled around him; then, locked together, they whirled and whirled as if set spinning by a force outside themselves, powerless to stop even if they would.

From where I sat I could see Uncle Steve standing in the door. He had seemed strange of late, more silent than usual. The Saturday before the dance I had ridden, as I often did, to meet the mail stage. Among Uncle Steve's letters had been one addressed by typewriter, posted in town and bearing no return address. He had opened it in its turn and then, as if he scorned the fact that he had read it, crumpled and thrust it into his pocket and left the house. That was not the beginning of his strangeness, but afterwards that strangeness had increased.

Tonight he stood in the dark doorway like a shadow, like a

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

part of the night, watching the dancers as we all were, but with different eyes. His eyes were the eyes of a hunter, and the two dancing were like birds playing in the sun, knowing nothing of the foe in ambush. . . . What a terrible thought, and more terrible still the fear that came with it.

My feet hurt again, though I had taken off my shoes. I shut my eyes, for while I wanted to watch the dancing, I didn't want to see Uncle Steve. He was gone when I looked again. Everybody was clapping, and Mr. Duval and Aunt Rena were going back to their places.

* * * *

THREE DAYS after the dance Aunt Rena sent me to the dug-out with a note. Strange, I thought, that Uncle Steve should have gone to town today, so soon after that other time. How could she help feeling it was strange?

Suppose I turned back? Suppose I returned and said to Aunt Rena that Mr. Duval had refused to let Zali come? But she had not told me that she was inviting Zali. Perhaps the message was about something else.

I heard someone riding behind me and, turning, saw that it was Uncle Steve, mounted on Hoxie, his fast blue Arabian. He had not ridden into town after all. I switched over in my saddle as he came abreast of me.

"Heather," he said, "give me that note."

I looked at him, letting my face go blank.

"In your pocket there. Give it to me."

The breast pocket of my shirtwaist. He could see it.

I had an impulse to wheel and gallop away, racing Piper against Hoxie, a ridiculous idea. I sat there, staring straight ahead of me.

He rode closer, took the note from my pocket, opened and read it. He was silent. Presently he said, "You are not to tell anyone you met me. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir. I understand."

"You are to do more than understand. You are to promise."

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

I wanted to say, "It was Aunt Rena's note." But I knew Aunt Rena had no right to send it. "I promise," I said.

He replaced the note in its envelope and handed it back. His narrowed eyes looked through me. "Go on," he said. "Deliver it."

I went on past him toward the dugout. I heard him ride off, saw him enter the road that led to town. I sat still, watching his dust. I read the note.

We are having a good dinner tonight.
May Zali join us?

Then there were words that made no sense. I puzzled over them.

Three wander lost complete.

I rode back to the ranch house.

Aunt Rena was sewing at the machine. She looked up brightly as I came in.

"Where's Zali?" she asked.

I said, "I don't want Zali. I'm tired of her spending the night with me."

She looked at me a moment, then carefully took the goods from under the needle. "I thought you liked Zali," she said.

"I like her," I admitted, "but a little of her goes a long way."

Aunt Rena smiled sadly. "You have so few friends—girls of your own age. Perhaps if she took another room—"

"She walks in her sleep," I answered. "You know that. Please don't ask her to come here any more."

"Not if you don't want her," said Aunt Rena. "I hope you didn't tell Zali—I mean after you delivered the note—I hope you didn't tell her how you felt."

"I didn't take the note," I said.

"Oh—I see. Then give it back to me."

I gave it back.

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

"You opened this," she said, and looked at me, astonished.
"Heather, you opened this."

I was silent.

She tore it into bits. I knew she would never trust me again, and that was all right.

Late that night—it must have been around two o'clock—I heard Uncle Steve come back. In the hot dark, with all the doors open and everything so still, I heard him come through the front hall and along the passage to his room, where Aunt Rena lay in bed, perhaps asleep.

* * * *

SCHOOL HAD begun again. Directly after breakfast we two scholars, as they called us, rode off with lunch pails and book satchels tied to our saddles. Zali and her father joined us at the dugout, and soon the schoolhouse was surrounded by burros and ponies, while their riders inside strove with the mysteries of learning.

Uncle Steve had said to Zali, when she first came, that she might visit the fall roundup. She reminded us of this promise, and two days after the roundup started she and Don and I set out for Comanche Lake where the men were camping. We went horseback, leading a pack mule with our bedrolls. It was a Friday afternoon and we were to return on Sunday.

Aunt Rena was busy making a shirt for Don. It was Maam who saw us off from the front gallery. Aunt Rena had been quiet of late, and I was certain that something had warned her, perhaps the incident of the note, or Uncle Steve's unexpected return. No doubt he had made some excuse for that, and she did not suppose it had been planned.

I felt easy in my mind, too inexperienced to know the mad hypnosis of desire, or how blind we become as danger closes in.

* * * *

IT WAS evening when we reached the roundup and the dry bed of Comanche Lake. Bark, the cook, with a flour-sack

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

apron over his chaps, stood ringing the supper bell. We surprised them, riding in out of the dusk. Uncle Steve and Al Klepper, the foreman, came to greet us. The boys welcomed us with shouts, and, sitting on the ground with them, we shared their meal. They had worked since dawn in sun and choking dust, they would work again tonight, but after supper they were ready for anything, ragging one another, joking, swapping yarns and tall tales.

Uncle Steve, sitting with the rest of us, seemed to be listening to the fun. After a while he went back into the woods and I didn't see him again till Zali and I were laying our bedrolls for the night. We laid them apart from the others in a cleared place on the other side of the chuck wagon. Back of us was a clump of cedars that afforded any privacy we might need. Don elected to sleep with the waddies, but Uncle Steve was close to us.

Zali and I lay whispering a while, looking up at the night sky hung with shining golden worlds. Her father had told her their names. "There's Vega," she said, "that bright one. And there's Pegasus—he's called the Texas Flying Horse. And there's Altair."

I was too sleepy to make them out. Her whispers became one with the chant of the locusts. I dropped into silence.

Deep in the night I woke. It had turned cool, and an old broken moon was climbing up the sky. Zali lay asleep, her pale face upturned in the moonlight. Beyond the chuck wagon the boys under their tarpaulins looked like desert dunes.

Suddenly I saw that Uncle Steve's bedroll was empty, his saddle gone. I knew the men came and went in the night as the guards were changed about the herd. I lay waiting for his return, and so fell asleep. The squeal of the cook's alarm clock split the dawn. I woke again, not knowing where I was.

Bark was shoveling the ashes off last night's coals, laying on shavings and pieces of wood. I watched the fire's red tongue lick away the darkness. The sky was reddening too.

Uncle Steve did not appear, and we ate breakfast without

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

him. Afterwards the waddies rode out on their night horses. The day had dawned cloudy, but no one looked for rain. We three were making ready to follow the waddies when someone came riding toward us out of the road.

There was so much dust I could not distinguish at first who it was; then I saw it was Nate, the choreman, on his black cayuse. They came straight across the cactus and chaparral. Bark hailed him, asked if he had had breakfast. Nate did not reply, looking only at Don and Zali and me. We must come home, he said.

"Why?" Don demanded, annoyed by this show of authority from Nate.

"Your grandmother sent me," Nate answered, and would say no more.

"I'm staying," said Zali, who was not under Maam's jurisdiction.

"No," said Nate. "You must come too."

Bark gave him a cup of coffee and some biscuits with bacon between them. Nate ate and drank; then he rode down to the *remuda* for a fresh horse. When he came back we followed him out into the road. He said nothing all the way, even when we spoke to him. Nate was part Cherokee Indian. He rode like an Indian, and he had an Indian's features and the reticence of an Indian.

At the south corral Zali was about to take the trail for the dugout, but Nate said that Maam wanted to see her. Zali was feeling cheated, but I knew that Maam had not willfully ordered her back from the roundup. I had known as soon as I saw Nate's face that something was wrong.

Maam met us on the gallery. She laid her arm around Zali and led her into the sitting room, closing the door. Don and I looked at each other, eyes questioning eyes. We sat down on the hall chairs like strangers. There was no one about anywhere. There was no sound till we heard Zali scream. We stood up then, and after a time Maam opened the door. We saw Zali kneeling beside a chair, her face buried in her arms.

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

Maam looked at me. How strange her eyes were. "Go and comfort Zali," she said. "Her father is dead."

I went into the sitting room and Maam closed the door behind me. I knelt down beside Zali and put my arms around her. "I knew he wasn't well," she sobbed. "In San Antonio before we left, I knew he was working too hard—teaching, writing. I thought it would be different here . . . Oh, Heather, it happened last night while I was asleep . . . It's not true!" she screamed suddenly. "It's not true."

I got her to my room, tried to make her lie down, but she only walked to and fro. She wanted to go to the dugout.

"I've got to see him," she said.

I wondered if he would be there still. Perhaps they had taken him away. I knew little about such things, and I had never seen anyone in grief.

Finally she lay down across the bed, and I went to find Aunt Rena. She would be brokenhearted too, but I hardly thought of that. I wanted her to help with Zali.

I was knocking on Aunt Rena's door when Don came and stopped me. "She's sick," he said. "You can't go in. They've sent Oral Klepper to the Sun-up to phone for Dr. Youree."

I had known it would go hard with her.

Don drew me away from the door.

"Mrs. Klepper said old Wig found him lying in the dugout. The door was open and Wig went in and found him. Nate told her. Nate took the coffin to the dugout—that coffin Mrs. Klepper's father had—and dressed him and laid him in it. Then he got Mrs. Klepper to help him carry it to the wagon and bring Mr. Duval here to the bunkhouse. They laid him in the front room there. Maam's orders."

Presently he added, "Oral ought to be back by now. He left before daylight."

"He's only a baby," I said.

"He's six," Don answered hardly. "And everybody else was on the roundup."

"Where was Doc Weaver?"

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

"With Mother. Miss Keezy called him. But he wanted a regular doctor, so they sent Oral to phone. . . . It's bad Dad's not here. Nate didn't see him at the roundup, and so didn't tell him. You remember he wasn't at breakfast, but Nate says he's still there."

I asked Don if he would take Zali in to see her father. I couldn't go myself—not yet. But Zali wanted to see him, and perhaps I would feel the same if it were my father.

5

THERE WAS A PALL over the house heavier than on the long days of rain—a pall, though the day which had dawned cloudy was fiery bright. I went out to saddle Piper and passed Mrs. Klepper hanging banners of diapers to the breeze. She said that Oral was back, and the doctor would be with Aunt Rena before night.

I rode out across the prairie, past the south corral, past the dugout, and along beside the canyon. The stream in the canyon bed was dry now. The rocks where the water had traveled were flat and smooth.

I was passing old Wig's shanty, and suddenly I saw him coming down a path he had hacked through the brush. At sight of me he turned back. He appeared to be frightened, and I thought he could not have recognized me. I rode up the path to reassure him. He turned at his door and faced me.

"Hello, Wig," I said.

He answered, "I must find my eggs and set my trap. Do you people want me to starve?"

"Starve, Wig? Nobody wants you to starve."

"Didn't Nate send you?" he demanded.

"Nate doesn't send me on errands," I replied.

He was silent. Then, "Nate said if I went outside he'd padlock my door. I've got no windows. If he padlocks my door I'll starve, or be burned alive in a brush fire, all the prairie being so dry. I've had no breakfast, and I'm hungry."

"All right," I said. "I'll go away. You can look for your eggs, and set your trap. I won't tell."

He said in a different voice, "Come inside, Miss Heather. I'd like to talk to you. I must talk to somebody. I'll put your horse behind the mott there."

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

I slid down, and furtively he led Piper behind a dogwood thicket, then opened his door.

"Pray sit down," he said ceremoniously, clearing a book and a skillet off a chair.

The place was a lair. A tumbled cot bed with a lantern and an alarm clock on the floor beside it. A legless stove resting on bricks, an Oliver typewriter, a confusion of empty cans and boxes.

Wig sat on the cot, plainly disturbed. People said the old man had become unbalanced by much learning, that he was a scholar with various degrees and had lectured at universities. Others ascribed his erratic state to his once having let go for taxes acres of prairie near Corsicana, land that became a forest of oil derricks. Perhaps both these tales were true.

He said, "When a man dies it can't be kept a secret. It is foolish of Nate to order me not to talk."

"You must have misunderstood him," I answered. "We all know Mr. Duval is dead. We know it was you who found him."

"It was. The door stood open." He lowered his voice. "You may not know it, but under an old moon the divining rod works best of all. Last night as soon as the moon was high enough—around two in the morning—I started witchin', as some call it. I went beside the canyon, which I seldom do at night, but the moon seemed extra bright, very bright, in fact, for an old moon. I followed where the rod led me. As I followed I heard a sound, a single sharp sound, blurred by distance, and I thought, Someone is out hunting. Or it may be they have encountered a wolf or a bear. . . .

"I went on, listening, but there was no other sound, and presently at the road that leads to the ranch house the rod began to tug and pull, and I stopped, not moving an inch, but looking about for a stone or a stick to lay on the spot, when suddenly, like the wind, a horse rushed by. On it was a man, a giant, and in his arms—"

Wig stopped and looked around as if he thought someone might be in the room with us.

"Yes, Wig."

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

"A woman was in his arms, struggling, pushing to get free. It was not a dream, for I heard as well as saw—heard the beat of the horse's feet, the cry of the woman as they passed. I felt too that rushing current as they went, so strong it knocked me down, and the dust blinded me. I got to my feet, and when I was able to see again they were gone. I made a cross-mark in the road where I thought the rod had pointed, but I could not be sure.

"As for the rod, it would not point again, but led me further along the road, not toward the ranch house, but the other way, then off along a trail to the dugout. The dugout door stood open, and I went inside. Almost at once I stumbled on something. I called out to the schoolmaster, but there was no answer. In the dark I struck a match, and there he was on the floor. I was certain he was dead. There was no breath and so much blood—on the rug, on the dirt floor. I saw a candle on the table and lit it, and went through the place looking for Zali, but she was not there.

"By now I was shaking and trembling, but I knew I must go to the house and tell Nate, since your uncle and Al Klepper and every other man would be on the roundup.

"It took me a long time to walk to the house. And Nate knew already. It was strange, but nothing surprised him. He said I was to keep still. Said I was to go to my house and stay inside it. I refused to do this, because then I would starve. He said he would padlock my door if I went out. I turned around and came back home. I had to rest on the way now and then. It was dawn when I got back. The crossmark was gone from the road."

I said, "It may all have been a dream. Perhaps you didn't really see—"

"Or hear? Nate says I didn't. But how can I believe that a dream would knock me down, or that a scream I hear still was not real? . . . I hope you won't repeat what I've told you, Heather. Your uncle gave me this shack when I first came here asking shelter in return for finding oil on his land. I have not been successful, but of course I have not given up hope. He

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

may withdraw his gift of the house if I disobey Nate's orders."

"I don't think Nate could influence Uncle Steve to take away your home. Still, it might be better—"

Yes, certainly it would be better if Wig were silenced.

He had no suspicion of who the strange horseman was, or who the woman in his arms. He seemed not to connect that sound of shooting with the schoolmaster's death. Knowing all I knew, I now knew too that my uncle had returned home with consequences more terrible than anything I had feared. He had left again, perhaps had returned to camp, and Nate was endeavoring to protect him.

My knees felt watery as I stood up. I hardly knew my own voice as I begged Wig to stay inside his house as Nate had bidden him. I said that I would bring him food. He agreed, looking bewildered, and I mounted Piper and rode back to the house.

In the kitchen Miss Keezy gave me beans and bacon and some hot corn pones to take to Wig, who I told her couldn't leave his shack. She assumed the old man was ill, and what wonder—with the shock of finding poor Mr. Duval!

"It's upset everybody," she said, and told me how, before she got breakfast under way, she had started as always with a cup of black coffee to Maam's room, and had gone first to Aunt Rena's door, "because something told me to."

"And there the poor lady was, lying half-dressed across her bed, and looking so strange I thought she was dead. . . . It was a heart attack. I've seen my mother in them, and I know."

I asked if Don were still with Zali, and Miss Keezy said that Zali was asleep. Mrs. Klepper had given her something to quiet her. "Just the soothing syrup she gives her kids. Zali's at peace for a little while."

"Could I go in to see Aunt Rena?"

Miss Keezy thought not. Doc Weaver had said she must be quiet for a few days—even Don hadn't been in.

Doc Weaver lived at the farm. Miss Keezy said he'd been up all night with a sick horse. "Didn't even know about Mr.

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

Duval. . . . You know, I suspicioned heart trouble all along with Mrs. Steve. The way the pupils of her eyes do when she gets excited, and that habit she's got of pressing her hand to her side when she's been hurrying or carrying something heavy. Mr. Duval was close to this family, and his death is a shock. And now poor Wig. . . . When Trouble comes he brings his family. . . . But if Wig can eat he'll be all right."

* * * *

I RODE on to Wig's shack carrying the basket of food, beginning to be faint with the burden of the secret inside me.

Yet with whom could I share it? Where could I go and say, "I know . . . I know . . ."? Not to Uncle Steve. The thought bowed me in the saddle. Not to Aunt Rena, or to Nate. Not to Maam. Not Miss Keezy, who, for all her sympathy, was hardly one of us. Not Don. Oh, most of all, not Don. . . .

I thought of Stan. If Stan were here I would tell him. He would answer quietly. He would carry the secret. . . .

Dark waters, I thought, coming out of the grove. And there in the blazing heat, between me and the ridge, hung a mirage, a stretch of black ocean seething, tossing. Waves tall as a man, taller, high as the highest hill I had ever seen, clouds of spray. . . . Had our dark waters flung themselves against the sky for all to see? . . .

I rode on, half-watching the mirage, thinking of Stan and his parents. They were Aunt Rena's people. They should be here. And yet, perhaps, as things were, she would not want them.

It was I who wanted them, wanting to talk to Stan. Suppose I wrote to Stan. Suppose I wired him: "Please come. Aunt Rena is ill"?

No, that was a telegram to send Aunt Juliet. And, as I now remembered, Aunt Juliet herself was ill. She had broken her arm—it was in a cast. Such a message would only worry her.

And Stan was just beginning his new job.

My secret must remain mine.

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

WIG DID NOT attend Mr. Duval's funeral next day, too proud to ask Nate's permission. On Wednesday he told me that he was leaving the ranch, was going to join his brother in a town sixty miles to the south. He wanted a horse, he said. Not necessarily a fine horse, or even young, so long as it could make the trip. He had some money and would pay for it. He would also give me his typewriter.

He dug into his boot and brought up an old tobacco pouch, untying its string, dropping onto the bed some bills and silver dollars, and a half-dozen Mexican opals.

He indicated the box on which the typewriter stood.

"There's some stationery in there," he said. "I write an occasional letter to the *Scientific American*. Homer Crimp wasted a lot of it, but you may have what's left."

I asked when Homer Crimp had been there, for now that I thought of it, I had not seen him since the night the town girls visited the ranch. Even the dance at the schoolhouse had not attracted him.

Wig was uncertain about the date of Homer's call. Apparently it was at that same time, the time the town girls had been with us.

"He'd spent the night at the ranch," Wig said, "and was riding away. I'd been out with my rod, and when I came back there he sat at my typewriter. I didn't object. I would have let him use it if I had been here, especially as he said it was urgent. He asked me for a stamp and I gave him one. He had wasted the stationery. Some of it lay wadded on the floor. He gathered it up and stuffed it into his pockets. Then he sealed his letter and rode off.

"I would not have called it an urgent letter," Wig added. "And I think my unexpected return made him nervous, for he overlooked one of his wasted sheets. After he had gone I picked it up and smoothed it out, thinking it might still be usable. Let me see—where did I put it?"

He opened a book and found the sheet of paper.

"It starts off playfully," he said, and read me the fragment

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

of Homer's effort. "The cat's away, so the mice are playing. Playing the game of love. Your own mouse and the mouse from the city. A hole in a hill makes a good playground. Open your eyes you fool and see what's going on." Then he x'd something out, and probably started another sheet."

That, I thought, was the typewritten letter with no return address and with, of course, no signature that I had brought to Uncle Steve. I remembered how Homer had sat alone in the dark of the gallery the night of his last visit. He had been sitting there still when the party broke up and Zali and I had gone to our room. No doubt in his lonely, angry vigil he had seen Aunt Rena slip away and had followed her.

I asked Wig if I might destroy the letter. If anyone found it among his things, I said, they might think he had written it. He smiled, as if to say no one would credit him with anything so foolish. However, he himself put a match to the letter, and burned it in the stove.

He spoke again of buying the horse, and I told him the typewriter would be payment enough, a fair trade.

I had some difficulty in convincing him of this, but finally he drew the strings of the tobacco pouch on his money and returned it to his boot.

"It's a good typewriter," he said. "I hope you use it."

I said that I would. "Don, too. Don's going to be a writer."

As to that, said Wig, we would wait and see.

* * * *

THERE WAS a horse named Flag, a bay with a gotch ear, who had twice left the ranch, lured away by mustangs, returning each time the fatter for his truancy. Only yesterday I had seen him in the west pasture, and that was good, for most of the horses were at the roundup. I told Don that Wig was leaving, and he agreed that we should mount him. Certainly nobody would think it strange if Flag disappeared again.

Nate was out mending fences that day. I am sure no one saw us as we roped Flag, fitted him out with an old saddle, a can-

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

teen of water, food in the saddlebags, and a sack of grain for himself. There would be no grass and very little water on the way.

By Thursday night Wig was packed for his journey, ready to leave at dawn. Don and I had arranged to come in time to saddle his horse and see him off. However, when we got there the shack was empty. Flag was missing from behind the thicket where we had hobbled him.

Wig's books were piled on his bed. There was a note beside them.

Dear Children. It is better for me that there be no good-byes. In these five years I have learned to love the Cottonwoods and its people. To Don I leave my books. To Heather my opals. If I could have stayed I would have found oil for you. I will write.

Your friend,
Frederic Wilkins.

We were silent.

Then, "It's strange," I began, about to say, "It's strange how something that happens can change so many lives."

I stopped, knowing the words might lead close to things Don did not dream of.

I said instead, "It's strange his name was Frederic Wilkins."

"He had to be named something," Don answered gruffly, and I knew that he too felt sad, standing in Wig's empty shack.

I put the note back in the envelope where the opals were.

We would come back later for the books and the typewriter.

* * * *

WE HAD got back from the roundup Saturday morning, and Mr. Duval was buried Sunday afternoon. Only a handful of us followed him to the cemetery. Don drove us in the surrey, Maam in front beside him, and Zali in the back with me. Nate and the minister rode horseback behind us.

Zali's grief seemed to extinguish her. Over and over she said,

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

"What will I do? Where can I go?" Her mother's people in Europe she knew nothing about. Her father had been an only child. His parents were dead.

Around midnight Saturday she had got up and begun to dress. She seemed to be moving in her sleep, but when I spoke to her she answered that she must find some flowers; when her mother died there had been flowers. She couldn't bear for her father to be buried without them.

I didn't know what to say to her, and I went out and got Maam, whose light was still burning. Maam persuaded Zali to get back in bed. They would find the flowers tomorrow, she promised. Tonight it was dark outside and looked like rain.

There was some quieting force in Maam. I had felt it as a child. Zali, with Maam sitting beside her, finally lay still.

I don't know how Don found them in our barren, drouth-ravaged world, but he did. Armfuls of dark purple flowers, down in the canyon, blooming in the shade of the rocks, their roots feeding at some hidden spring.

Zali took the flowers simply. No miracle to her, no strangeness at all. She had been promised flowers, and they were here. Drained of tears, she was like a wraith. At the grave she could not stand upright, but leaned against Don, who stood with his arm around her.

Don had felt that his father should be there, had said so to Maam. Maam had replied, "These are bad times." She spoke as if Uncle Steve were needed at the roundup, as no doubt he was.

"He would come if he knew," Don said to me.

* * * *

DR. YOUREE found Aunt Rena's illness grave indeed. She must remain in bed, he said, and have no shock of any kind. He left medicines, and gave careful instructions to Miss Keezy, who had had experience with such cases.

He brought us our first news of the Galveston storm. Two hurricanes, blowing oppositely, had met on the island, bringing gulf and bay together. There were few details at the moment,

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

the wires being down, but loss of life and property was sure to be heavy.

I thought instantly of Stan, of Aunt Juliet and Uncle Park. Often I had heard Aunt Rena say their home was near the beach.

"Nothing to the patient about this," said Dr. Youree, speaking to Maam, to Don and me. And then to Maam, "You were right not to have Steve called home. There was nothing he could have done. We can only wait. And no one beside Miss Keezy in the room. I will send a nurse."

So none of us could go in to see Aunt Rena. Only Miss Keezy, her large shape moving lightly into the darkness beyond that door. Maam received the doctor's orders without reply. So far as either of us knew, she had not visited that room before he came, nor did she expect to do so now. It went hard, however, with Don.

Saturday. The storm had come on Saturday, the first day I had carried food to Wig, the day I had come out of the grove and seen the mirage. Black waters with high waves, and blowing clouds of foam. . . The day I had wanted to telegraph Stan. No one could telegraph him now. The wires were down.

Don wrote a letter to Stan, but received no reply.

Aunt Rena's *Galveston News* did not arrive that week in the mail, but other papers came, bearing accounts of the storm and lists of the dead which we searched anxiously.

Our hearts were heavy with many things as we prepared Wig for his journey, and stood at last in his empty shack.

When Trouble comes he brings his family.

I gave Zali one of my opals. She said that someday she would have it set in a ring.

It was good to see her take an interest in something.

* * * *

THERE HAD been no school that week, but Wednesday we received word that a teacher was engaged and that classes would resume next day. Zali would not return for another

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

week, but Don and I set out as usual. The new teacher was a Mrs. Rennett whose husband ran the Picador outfit for its Glasgow owner.

A hush lay over the schoolroom as we sat facing Mrs. Rennett that first morning. Behind her on the blackboard was a question Mr. Duval had written for the history class to ponder. He often asked questions to make us think.

During the morning Mrs. Rennett erased the question and put some figures in its place. By afternoon the noise and disorder so effectually dealt with by Mr. Duval was in full tide. Ben Briggs, reprimanded for clowning, changed his mood and put a bullet through the ceiling.

* * * *

MAAM, WHO had seemed lately to move in a dark abstraction, came out of her cloud on learning that Mrs. Rennett was to be our teacher. Lily Potter, she called her. She said Lily Potter had been eyeing that job for years and could never have sneaked into it if she—Maam—had been watching. Now that Lily had the job—and we were quick to gather that Lily was not equal to it—nobody would be able to dislodge her.

"I must talk this over with your father," Maam said to Don. "Until I do, you and Heather go on to school."

That night, lying beside Zali, I woke to the sound of rain. Not the familiar chastisement of thunder and lightning (as if we were to blame for the long dry spell) but a slow and quiet downpour that might have been going on for days. It would be raining still tomorrow.

Oh, Stan, where are you?

* * * *

TOMORROW AND tomorrow and tomorrow.

The prairies turned green. The wells, the water holes, filled. The windmills creaked and sang. The cottonwoods towered motionless, each a separate fountain running over.

For me, the ancient gloom inside the house, the dark, enor-

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

mous shadow of the rain. Gloom deepened by Zali's weeping. You came on her sobbing alone. You woke to hear her in the night. Be kind, be patient with Zali. If you grow weary of another's grief, you may have to learn what grief is. . . Ah, but I know already, wondering about Stan.

One night in a dream I saw him struggling in a black ocean. Tall waves, and Stan fighting hard. I thought, I must go to him, and tried to move. My body seemed tied, and I could only stand still and watch him sink and vanish. . . All at once he was walking toward me along the sand, holding something in his hand, holding it out to me—my bracelet. "Put it on," he said. "I want to see it on your arm."

* * * *

IT WAS too soon to hope for an answer to Don's letter. Mail to and from Galveston did not move normally. However, the *Houston Post* had told us that things would soon be organized. The Red Cross was there, with Clara Barton herself in charge.

On Friday a stranger traveling through, stopping to be fed, told us it was estimated that six thousand lives had been lost.

If Stan were living—if Stan and his parents were alive—would they not have managed to send us, if only by a stranger passing through, some reassuring word?

* * * *

THE ROUNDUP was over, the men were home.

Uncle Steve too returned, haggard and pale in his yellow slicker. He went upstairs to the airdome, where Maam joined him.

Long afterward I was to learn that he had ridden into town and surrendered to Jim Braddock, the sheriff. One day I was to hear Maam say, "No grand jury would have indicted him. It is the Unwritten Law."

At the time I knew only that he came and went as always, except that his steps led to and from the airdome, and that he never entered Aunt Rena's room.

6

THE *GALVESTON NEWS* arrived at last, and it was Don who found their names. Aunt Juliet's. Uncle Park's. Not Stan's.

Terrible to know that they were gone . . . Aunt Rena—how would she bear it? Juliet. Juliet with her flashing smile—so alive. . . Uncle Park who had to get back to his fruit boats. . .

But not Stan. Thank you, God. But how—Was it a mistake that his name was missing, since his parents' names were there?

Maam said, "If Stan were alive he would have gotten in touch with us."

Don said, "I'll wire. We'll send it by the first person who comes."

No one came. The roads were too boggy for wheels or for the feet of horses. Supplies were being packed in by muleback. By muleback Nate rode to the Sun-up outfit to phone in our telegram. The Sun-up was five miles nearer town than we. Someday the wires would come as far as the Cottonwoods.

The doctor himself came muleback. He said that Aunt Rena must not be told about Park and Juliet. "Not till I think it wise." He seemed disappointed in Aunt Rena's progress. No one was to go in the room, he said again, except Miss Keezy. In the constant rain he had been unable to find a nurse.

* * * *

THANK YOU, God. Oh, thank you. I will say my prayers every day. I will read the Bible, chapter by chapter. I will go to church when the family goes and not hunt excuses for staying home. Thank you for letting Stan be alive.

Stan's telegram said: "Have just returned from Guatemala. Ignorant of tragedy till cable reached me. Writing."

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

Finally his letter. You could see how shaken he was. They had dispatched him to begin a year at the Guatemala office. It was true. It was true that his parents were gone. It would be a while, he said, before he could take it in. . . A different world. So many bereaved, homeless. Wreckage everywhere.

Almost every week after that, one of us—Don or I—wrote to Stan. We told him Aunt Rena was ill, and how she must not know about Park and Julie.

* * * *

MULEBACK, well-slickered in the pouring rain, Don and I made the daily trip to school. A week of this, then Maam remarked that we might as well stay home. Miss Keezy, she said, needed help in the kitchen now that her duties were increased, and we couldn't be learning much from Lily Potter. We were to have, when Maam could find one, a tutor, or perhaps a governess, someone qualified to prepare us for the schools we should later attend.

Zali was included in these plans, for Zali was to remain with us. She had, in fact, nowhere else to go, and no money.

I have always suspected that Uncle Steve resisted the idea of Zali's remaining in the house. Surely he must have found painful and incongruous the prospect, and later the fact, of daily association with the daughter of Arthur Duval. Yet Maam's sense of obligation, of responsibility, allowed them no other course.

I know she mentioned boarding school to Zali, only to bring on fresh tears. I don't know how Maam reasoned. I only know that Zali stayed and that Maam gave her the room next to mine—there was a connecting door—and told me to look after her. "This is Zali's home," she said.

* * * *

COMPANY was beginning to come again, muleback in the rain. Uncle Steve made them welcome, but things were different now. Maam was not the same, and Aunt Rena, who had been

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

the glowing heart of everything, was absent. Uncle Steve himself was like another man. Never demonstrative, there had been at least his humorous smile, his occasional quips and friendly laugh. Now his presence seemed to generate silence, to dry up the springs of normal human intercourse.

He spared nothing where the care of Aunt Rena was concerned. Dr. Youree on one of his visits mentioned the name of a heart specialist in Chicago. The day came when the great man arrived at the Cottonwoods and spent an hour beside Aunt Rena's bed. There was another hour of conference with Maam and Uncle Steve. That was a day in late fall when the sun was shining. It had begun to seem the sun would never shine again.

Uncle Steve still slept in the airdome above my room. I could hear him go up the stair that was along the wall beside my bed. I could hear him again more faintly when he reached the airdome and walked about, and also the creak of his chair as he sat down at the desk. Sometimes I could hear him get into bed, but not often. I was generally asleep by then.

* * * *

DON WENT in first to see his mother. Afterward he would not speak of it, and when they let me in I knew why. Aunt Rena lay straight in the bed with her eyes closed and her hands folded on her breast. The illusion of death was there, for she seemed not to breathe. When I spoke her name her eyelids parted and she looked at me. Her face had grown thin. There was no color in her beautiful, generous mouth. She was only the ghost of my Aunt Rena. In that instant I hated my uncle for what he had done. Till then, I had feared for him, had seemed almost to understand his act.

That night I slept beside her. Miss Keezy had been sleeping in the small adjoining room that had been Don's as a child, and that held now a bed and Aunt Rena's sewing machine. Dr. Youree, who still had not found a nurse, said that Don, Zali and I were to take turns watching, and should call Miss Keezy

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

only if she were needed. So we knew Aunt Rena was better.

On my first night beside her Aunt Rena lay still, though I don't think she slept. Once when she must have dropped off she woke with a start that woke me too. I lay listening to the rain; then in the dark I heard Aunt Rena's voice. It seemed faint and far away.

"Heather?"

"Yes, dear."

She spoke again with pauses between the words, as if speaking were hard.

"I'm glad it's you, Heather. Once—once you deceived me. You opened a note. But you brought it back to me. You did not lie when I accused you . . . I am going to ask you something. I would never ask anyone else, even Don. You must tell me the truth."

Silence. Then, "What are they saying? What are they saying about me?"

"Who, dear?"

"The boys. The people who come here. What do they say?"

"Why—they ask how you are. The boys are worried. They miss you."

"Is that all?"

"Why, yes, Aunt Rena."

"And—Mr. Duval. What do they say about him?"

"They—Almost nothing. But you can see how sorry they are. Everybody liked him. At school the scholars didn't make any noise at first."

"Who's teaching—in his place?"

"Mrs. Rennett from the Picador."

"Miss Keezy couldn't remember her name. She says you and Don and Zali are to have a tutor."

"Yes, Maam's looking for one, writing letters, I mean. It's hard to find one so late in the term."

Silence again. I felt her mind groping, seeking words for the next question.

"Do they know—Heather, do they know how he died? . . . Mr. Duval, I mean."

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

"No, Aunt Rena. I never heard anyone say. Zali told me he hadn't been well in San Antonio. We were with the roundup, you remember. Maam sent for us. Sent Nate."

In the dark I knew that she covered her face, that tears were creeping between her fingers. I was frightened, for during these long dark weeks she had never cried. Miss Keezy had told me.

After a little she spoke again.

"Zali—how is she taking it?"

I answered that Zali grieved still; it had been a shock. "But she's not worried about her future now, because she's staying here."

"Always?"

"As long as she wants to. Maam said, 'This is her home.' "

Aunt Rena lay still. Finally she slept.

* * * *

WHAT WAS she thinking, remembering, during that long month of rain? She never asked for anything.

"Would you like a glass of water, Aunt Rena?"

I would offer it to her and she would drink, sometimes as if she had been thirsty. At first she wouldn't let us touch her hair, but in time she grew submissive as we combed and braided it, cutting away impossible snarls. It was like a light in the room, her thick ruddy hair.

Zali was a better nurse than either Don or I. She had nursed her mother, she said. Now competently, quietly, she watched beside the ghost of Aunt Rena, rendering the services of the sickroom, or sitting near the bed studying her French grammar, memorizing her French rhymes and fables.

Don worried most, in and out of the sickroom. He could not fail to observe that Maam and his father avoided that room. The discovery bewildered him. He went to Maam, accusing her of neglect.

"Neglect is an ugly word," she answered him. "If you feel your mother needs more care and attention, see that you give them to her."

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

This did not satisfy Don. That night he followed his father up to the airdome, questioning him. Uncle Steve faced his son in silence. They stood looking at each other, eye to eye.

"I wanted to hit him," Don said to me. "Then all of a sudden I was sorry for him. My God, Heather, what does it mean? What's wrong with all of us? What's wrong with everything?"

Zali had asked me almost the same question.

She had said, "I didn't know till I came here that he sleeps upstairs, that he never goes in her room."

Her troubled eyes met mine.

I was silent then, as I was silent now.

Zali never spoke of it again.

* * * *

RAIN, RAIN.

My birthday came and went, forgotten by everyone, though I thought of it myself and wore the bracelet Stan had given me, sitting beside Aunt Rena, watching the rain. Aunt Rena never spoke. Sometimes it seemed a dream that she had talked with me in the night.

On the doctor's next visit he brought with him Jincy Higgins, a practical nurse. Jincy was young and husky, with plump red lips and black eyes. The rain stopped shortly after she came, and the late October sun shone on a green and overflowing world.

We were free now, Don and Zali and I. No school, and apparently no one thinking about us. Except for her habit of guarding Zali at meals, Maam appeared to have forgotten our existence. We decided to camp out all night and see if anyone noticed.

The weather was blue and sparkling, the lush prairie grass dry after a few days of sun. Leading a pack horse piled with our bedrolls, food, coffeepot and skillet, we rode out one evening completely unobserved. Maam might miss Zali at supper, but would assume we were all somewhere together and would eat later.

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

We pitched camp at a favorite spot between the wood and the canyon. At the wood's edge we built a fire. After supper, we sat talking while a mockingbird sang in a blackjack thicket.

Then a miracle happened. Don began to say one of his poems. Perhaps it was the influence of the rising full moon, with everything so still, even the mockingbird. Maam had mentioned that poem. She said it was a ballad like those of the old minstrels.

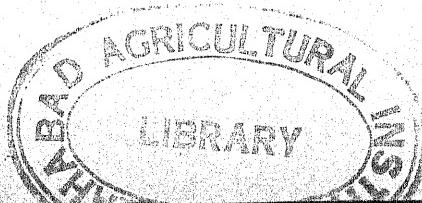
How long and rich, how almost hypnotic, Don's voice was, coming out of the shadows. I can see Zali now, watching him, listening, her dark eyes shining in the firelight.

When the poem stopped he seemed to come back from far away. We begged for another, but he looked at us across the dying fire and was silent. He would not go back to the place where his poems lived.

Zali and I spread our bedrolls on our side of the blackjack thicket, got into our kimonos. Zali had a new white one. After she had gone to sleep I got out my gun and laid it on my other side. Don had a gun, of course, and usually one is enough, but a wolf could eat us alive and we could scream to heaven without waking Don.

Lying on my back, I stared at the moon. Bright gold and full, it kept me awake. Now and then it moved behind a cloud and I was conscious of other things, of a mourning dove inside the thicket, of the far-off bark of a coyote; of the fiddling of crickets, and the stir of our hobbled horses as they grazed; of the canyon stream murmuring, of Zali's even breathing. It was like the night of the roundup, except that then Zali had been the wakeful one, and there had not been this close, dazzling moon. No moon at all that night until very late.

Finally I slept too, waking again to see the moon high in the sky. No sound of a bird now, or coyote, or even of Zali breathing. I glanced at her bed and saw that she was standing beside it. In my sleep I must have heard her rise. Now as I watched her she began to move away, gliding barefoot beside the thicket.



MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

I realized at once that she was walking in her sleep, something she had not done for a long time. I felt in the dark grass for my shoes, pulled them on, buttoning the top buttons, keeping an eye on Zali till she turned at the end of the thicket and disappeared. I was frightened, for she had gone in the direction of the canyon.

I ran after her, calling to Don, hopeless of making him hear me in his always heavy sleep. Then on the other side of the thicket I stopped short.

In the clear moonlight Zali stood beside Don where he lay asleep. She stood tall and white, with her head inclined as if she were watching him; then, as gently as a dove might settle on a bough, she sank down and lay beside him. She lay close, sharing his pillow.

I didn't know which to wake, Don or Zali. Finally, remembering Zali's tears over the peaches ("I always take something I covet"), I caught hold of Don's arm and pulled. It took him a moment to grasp the situation, even to realize where he was. Astonished beyond words, he gathered up Zali and carried her to her bed, laid her down without waking her. I kept a hand on her the rest of the night.

Sometimes after that I saw Don looking at Zali in a strange veiled way. I had explained to him that she walked in her sleep and remembered nothing about the incident. He said that he understood, and yet he seemed to feel that they shared a secret.

We rode home next morning in time for breakfast. There was a gratifying commotion when they learned we had been out all night. Maam speeded up her search for a tutor, and shortly after that Miss Violet Lingram appeared.

* * * *

MISS LINGRAM was a thin, gray-eyed lady with a high ash-blonde pompadour and a row of curls across her forehead—

Maam had arranged by letter that our courses for the year should conform to those of the public schools, and that Zali should continue her French. The new governess heeded these

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

instructions, though as to the French, Zali remarked that Miss Lingram's accent should not be taught to a dog. Music, Miss Lingram had stated, she could not teach. This was unfortunate, for music was what Zali liked best. Maam saw to it that she practiced every day.

One day Miss Lingram questioned me about Aunt Rena. Certainly it would have puzzled any newcomer to discover, as time went by, that the younger Mrs. Roy kept always to her bed, while her husband lived upstairs and never—openly, at any rate—went near her. An eccentric man, this owner of the Cottonwoods, sitting silent at the head of his table, a man whom Miss Lingram, accustomed, she said, to conversing with the great of the land, could not draw into the most casual exchange of ideas.

I would have found Miss Lingram herself eccentric if I had stopped to think about her. I was, however, much too busy with the lessons she assigned us. Indeed, all three of her pupils were occupied. Gone were the evenings when we sat around the lamp, the logs blazing in the fireplace, the norther moaning at the panes, while one of us—usually Uncle Steve—read from some book, old or new.

Maam still closed the evening with a chapter from the big Bible, but until that moment came, Miss Lingram's pupils were burrowing hard amid logarithms or conjugations or the dates of wars.

In those long dull evenings Don sat beside the center table. He seemed to brood as he worked, the rough lock falling over his forehead, the forehead of a dreamer, a poet.

I looked from his bowed head to Zali. She sat, as always on these cold nights, close to the fire. There was a tablet on her knees. Over her black dress she wore a small white ice-wool shawl. Her hair was combed in dark wings over her ears. She had but the one black dress and she wore it all the time. It comforted her, she said. She seemed all shadow except her face, pale and intent, and the white hand, writing.

"Heather, study your lesson."

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

Maam sat at the table near Don. While Uncle Steve read his papers, she hemmed napkins and towels or mended some piece of linen torn in the wash. We made, no doubt, a pleasing picture, gathered there. The rancher and his family with the orphan girl they shelterd. A stranger might have seen in that picture all the elements of home, security and peace.

No heart there knew peace.

Yes, I must study. I must stop thinking.

But for Maam's sharp and all-inclusive eye, Miss Lingram's assignments might have been lighter. It was a hardship having a grandmother who had been a schoolteacher.

* * * *

CHRISTMAS came, a strange Christmas with Aunt Rena lying ill. She it was who had led us in stringing popcorn and cranberries to festoon the tree, in gilding walnuts and cutting moons and stars out of tinfoil to hang among the branches with the store-bought bells and baubles.

We didn't make any ornaments this year, but Maam sent the waddies out as always to cut a tree. They came back with an immense cedar that filled one corner of the sitting room, and bunches of mistletoe to hang in strategic places. I found some reams of tinsel, a little tarnished, and some ornaments that had survived from other years. I wanted things to be festive, for I had a feeling that Stan was coming, as he had promised he might. Still, however dim, the lights would go up if Stan came.

Maam let Don and Zali and me go into town with Nate on his monthly trip for supplies. She gave money to each of us (Zali accepted everything as if from her own parents), tells us to buy presents for everybody, discussing with us what each waddy might like, what might please Miss Lingram, Jincy Higgins, Miss Keezy and the various Kleppers. Don spoke of his mother, and we decided she should have a new brush and comb.

The main street of the town was crowded; so was the big department store where we went to choose our gifts. Maam

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

had bidden me stay close to Zali, plainly afraid that someone might say something to disturb her. Neighbors from the outlying ranches greeted us, town friends asked us to come home with them. Formerly we might have accepted such invitations, but Maam had instructed us to put up at the hotel.

Nate, of course, stayed with the wagon. On the third day we joined him and rode home. In the wagon bed, crowding the supplies, were our purchases, which included a large box of fireworks—rockets and Roman candles—which, with the rest of the prairieside, we always set off at Christmas. Visitors had sometimes wondered at the custom, but Maam said it was fitting, the lights in the heavens reminding her of the Star of Bethlehem.

The weather was warm as April, fine and clear. On Christmas Eve we had our fireworks. Don and Scotty took charge, with nearly everybody else watching from the front gallery. Zali and I pulled Aunt Rena's bed over to the window so that she might see the rainbow fountains playing in the dark sky.

Next day a norther was blowing. Christmas came in with a flurry of snow. Some of the boys had gone hunting, and there was wild turkey for dinner, innumerable things out of cans, and Miss Keezy's own batter bread and mince pie. Uncle Steve carved at one end of the table and Maam at the other. A quiet table for Christmas, but noise and the Klepper kids came later around the tree.

No word from Stan. No chance of his coming now. I put away the cuff links I had bought for him. There was no other gift for him on the tree. No one else had expected him.

AFTER CHRISTMAS MAAM'S vigilance over our homework appeared to relax. Miss Lingram accordingly ceased to crack the whip, and life became tolerable. Sometimes we studied alone beside the sitting-room fire, this being generally when Uncle Steve was away. Business still took him into town, and even across the state. Indeed, he seemed to go more often now, to one place or another.

Zali felt the winter weather, and Maam bought her knit sleeping pants and flannelette nightgowns. Even so, she used to get into bed with me for warmth, pressing close to my back, shivering, almost crying with the cold.

The doctor came rarely now. He was encouraged by Aunt Rena's improvement, and told her that as long as she stayed in bed and had no excitement and kept the will to live, she was bound to progress. "I have the will to live," she answered, "because I am going to Julie as soon as I get strong."

He still forbade us to tell her that Julie was gone, said that we must acquiesce in all her plans; when she was well enough to go to Julie she would be well enough to know the truth.

One Sunday after church Maam came in. All these months Maam had not even turned into the passage that lay between Aunt Rena's room and the sitting room. Now she was moved to come.

We had just got home from church, where a visiting preacher, young and impassioned, had spoken on forgiveness from the text, "Seventy times seven."

I could feel Maam listening, could almost feel her thoughts as she sat erect, her black felt toque set squarely on her iron-gray head. Uncle Steve on my other side was listening too, but who could feel his thoughts except as a wall around him?

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

After dinner I was alone with Aunt Rena, brushing her hair. It was thicker now, and more burnished, more bright than I had ever seen it. Sometimes it seemed that all Aunt Rena's vitality, all her fire, had gone into her hair.

I felt a tremor go through her. She closed her eyes the way she had done at first when anyone at all came near. I looked around and saw Maam standing at the foot of the bed.

She stood silent, her hands folded in front of her. I couldn't read Uncle Steve's face, but I could read Maam's. I knew she had wrestled before she came in.

"How do you feel, Rena?" she asked.

Aunt Rena's eyelids lifted and she looked back at Maam from her long green eyes.

"I'm almost well," she said.

Don came in and sat on the bed. He took his mother's hand.

"Is there anything you'd like?" asked Maam.

Aunt Rena's eyes closed again.

"I have everything," she said. "I'll soon be out of your way. I'm going to Julie."

There was silence, and I trembled. How like Maam it would be to tell her the truth.

Don said, "Don't talk like that, Mother."

And Maam, "How can you be in anyone's way, off here in your room?"

Silence again. I could see Aunt Rena was in pain. I brought her medicine and Don gave it to her.

Maam turned to go, delayed. "If you need anything, Rena, let me know," she said.

She went out.

It was a long time before she came again.

* * * *

THE FIRST warm days of February loosed floods of redbud and white wild plum. Voluptuous golden blossoms swelled on the prickly pear, and pools of bluebells glowed in the dark wood.

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

Glad of the spring, I rode along the canyon, green now with ferns and cresses, its shallow stream charging over rocks and boulders to drop a sudden waterfall near our secret place. Sometimes Don, always more restless in the spring, rode with me.

"If we were married," he said on one such ride, "I could leave here next summer."

He glanced at me uncertainly, knowing that his words were something less than romantic. Still, they were true. All that married people needed for any venture was the consent of their mates. With their vows, they passed out from parental dominance. However, parental dominance guided us now, and we would not be married by summer if his father thought ill of the idea.

"God knows what he thinks," Don said.

We were passing Wig's shanty, folded in its thicket of white dogwood. The path he had cut to his door was overgrown with weeds and brambles. No word had come from him since a card in September. But then, he had never written letters except to the *Scientific American*.

The gales of March blew in Zali's birthday. As early as January I had filched from its hiding place her choice of Wig's opals, and Maam had had it set in a ring. Miss Keezy baked a white cake and crowned it with seventeen candles. Dave and June Willoby had supper with us that night. All the boys were on hand, and afterwards we danced. I squeezed out a tear for my own birthday, buried under the winter snows. I knew by now that Zali would always come first. The old order was ended. How frail our world had been to shatter in an instant as it had.

* * * *

IN APRIL Aunt Rena was moved to a chair beside the window. In late May, which was as warm as summer, Don carried her out to the patio, where she half sat, half lay, in a shaded

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

Morris chair among the scraggly roses she had planted and tended. Uncle Steve, coming and going, could have seen her through the open jalousies of the hall if he had looked. Maam, who might have visited with her there, chose instead to supervise spring house cleaning, which included Aunt Rena's room.

As summer advanced, Aunt Rena was allowed to walk about, though Don had still to carry her down the three steps into the patio. She would move hesitantly through the hall, perhaps from weakness, perhaps from a fear of meeting Uncle Steve, though she never asked if he were in the house.

* * * *

MISS LINGRAM left us that summer, mounted a straw sailor on her pompadour, gathered up her rainy-day skirt (the very thing for traveling) and ascended to the wagon seat beside Nate, her various bags and boxes ranged behind. Maam had found her inadequate, especially in the matter of Zali's French lessons, and she would not return.

Jincy Higgins departed also to marry a sheepman to whom she was betrothed. It didn't matter now, for Don and Zali and I were free to take her place. Aunt Rena was improving steadily, though she worried over not hearing from Julie. In the late spring she had asked me to write to Stan, had dictated the letter, begging for definite news of her sister. "I feel you are keeping something from me," she said. "I can't understand why Julie's arm has not mended. I am almost well, and as soon as I can I am coming to her. . . . I need her. I need her so much. . . . Don't write that," she added. "Say, 'In the meantime, I must know the truth—just what is wrong.' "

This, I knew, would be a hard letter for Stan to answer.

When he wrote, it was to me. "If Aunt Rena is better, can't she be told the truth? It's hard to keep up the farce, and it's not really deceiving her. You can see she knows something has happened."

Hard to keep up the farce. Hard for him who lived daily

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

with the truth. I asked him to write Dr. Youree, and he must have done this, for later his letters began again, keeping up the farce.

A summer without Stan. A strange, long summer.

There was the roundup dance, as always, at the schoolhouse. Maam and Uncle Steve did not attend it, but Don took Zali and me. The next day Mr. Clarence Boyd arrived.

Uncle Steve had said that he wanted Don to have a male tutor, and Maam's search had been diligent and finally fruitful. Mr. Boyd, a quiet person in horn-rimmed glasses, seemed on appearance too young, as Miss Lingram had seemed too old. However, he was all of thirty, and if his near-sighted eyes looked at you as swimmingly, as wistfully, as a baby's, it meant no artlessness within.

Don and I liked him—I was not certain of Zali. Coming in the erratic wake of Miss Lingram, he seemed at times too thorough, too methodical. Yet I drudged for him as I had never drudged for any teacher. His bold red A on an exercise brought me unmixed joy.

Maam had no doubt informed our tutor that in Don he had a poet, and Don may have permitted him to discover that this was true. However, he would have seen for himself that Don was no student, but a free and unhobbled soul grazing among the stars. Zali pursued her music—her practicing—outside his domain, but you could see her French impressed him favorably.

As for me, I felt—during this fine riding weather—bound and tied. I wanted to please Mr. Boyd, but I wanted the outdoors more. I still missed the rides to and from school. Piper missed them too. I think he blamed me for neglecting him.

Zali said, "Would you like me to speak to Maam? She'll change our schedules, if I say I need more fresh air."

I told her I'd speak to Maam myself. However, I knew I wouldn't get far, and ought to let my intercessor go ahead. Zali was indulged as Don and I had never been. Any object in the mail-order catalogues, any delicacy stored on the pantry shelves

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

against feast day or company, if Zali asked it of Maam she generally got it, so generally in fact that one day I took the matter up with Maam.

"I've been wanting that saddle a year," I said, "and you told me we couldn't afford it."

Maam explained that Zali was an orphan and had no one except us to give her things. I answered that I too was an orphan, and equally limited in the matter of benefactors.

"But we are your family," Maam said, and laid her hand on mine, her eyes actually entreating me.

* * * *

THAT FALL, in the interests of equitable freight rates, Uncle Steve left for Washington.

His prolonged absence brought a sense of freedom. A shadow seemed to lift from the house. And yet, strangely enough, I missed the creak of the stair as he went up to bed at night, the sound of his walking about the room or sitting down at the desk. My seventeenth birthday came while he was gone, more gala than Zali's had been, more like old times, with a barbecue and dancing.

That night Don gave me my ring, a diamond—not so large as Aunt Rena's emerald, but flawless and white. Maam said it cost ten calves.

"How like her," sighed Aunt Rena. "I wonder, Heather," she added, "if you would cash a check for me."

She knew that my cow, Ida, had lately been sold. The money was still in my room. With so few opportunities for spending, money lasted a long time.

Aunt Rena made no explanation when I brought her the price of Ida. When and how I would cash the check I didn't know. She told me not to mention it to anyone.

"I'd like to see Trink," she said.

That explained it. Miss Keezy had said that Trink was driving into town to pick up the new engine, asked if we had any

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

errands for him. Whatever errand Aunt Rena had for Trink, he would not fail her. I wondered as I kissed her good night what the errand was. I felt that had I been staying with her she would have told me in the night. However, it was Don's turn to be with her, and I would probably never know. Trink came in as I went out.

In her room, Zali was writing letters to friends in San Antonio. On her bureau I could see the bowl of wild flowers before her father's picture. She had begun to place flowers there when she first came to us, and she did it still.

Tonight, the letters finished, she came and stood in the doorway between our rooms.

"Are you engaged to Don?" she asked.

I thought, This secret is mine. I can tell it if I like.

"Yes," I said. "We've been engaged a year."

"I thought so," she answered, "from something Don said."

"And my ring," I reminded her. (What had Don said?)

"No, your ring needn't mean Don. You never told me who gave it to you, or why. And you and Don don't act as if you were engaged. When will you get married?"

"Not till we finish school," I said. "So Maam thought we shouldn't talk about it till then. Don and I don't care who knows it."

"I see," she said, and gave me the key to her locked outer door, a nightly precaution against walking in her sleep.

What had Don said, I wondered, but did not ask, knowing she would never tell me.

* * * *

SOUNDS WOKE me. A knob turning. My own knob—from outside. A knocking on my door.

The world was still dark outside my window, the darkness before dawn.

"Heather! Heather!" Don's voice.

I opened the door, and he stood there, holding a lamp.

"Is Mother with you?" he asked. "My God, Heather, she's

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

gone. I've looked everywhere," he added, as I threw a kimono around me. "Everywhere she could be. I just happened to wake up and see her empty bed."

We were hurrying back to her room. He opened the closet and showed me that it was bare, the suitcase and satchel gone from the top shelf. Apparently she had spent the night packing.

Don, the sound sleeper.

We looked at each other.

"She was worried about Aunt Julie," he said. "Could she have started for Galveston?"

I was certain of it. I told him about Trink, how they had talked together.

"But Trink wasn't to leave till six o'clock," he said.

"She must have made him change his plans," I answered, and Don said, "She'll never make it."

He had thrown on his clothes, and I got into mine while he went to saddle the horses. It was black dark as we rode. Early still, and yet we might be too late.

Day had dawned when we came upon them. The small Bain wagon was standing in the open road, and Trink came running to meet us. His frantic greeting was in Spanish, but we recognized the word *enferma*—sick. "*La senora—enferma*."

Aunt Rena lay in the wagon bed. A cushion she had brought, probably to soften the hard seat, was under her head, and Trink's slicker was spread over her. She had on her dark-green suit. The high collar of her shirtwaist had been torn open, perhaps by Trink. I could see that the worst of the attack had passed, and she whispered as we bent over her, "Let me go on. I'm all right. Let me go."

Don held her in his arms, bidding Trink tie our horses to the wagon. Trink, eager to talk to me, asked me to sit beside him. Slowly he turned the wagon. Slowly we started home.

I had prayed that Maam would not be around when we arrived. She was not, but she knew all about it before the day was over. Everyone knew. Don carried Aunt Rena to her bed, and Trink went on to town bearing a message for Dr. Youree,

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

who, when he came, was indignant that his patient had not been better watched. Maam informed him that the catastrophe was due to the deception he had required of us. If his patient had been told the truth about her sister she would not have gone. He still insisted that she should not be told.

That week we brought Ellen Jute, a barefoot nester girl from over by the Ridge, to sleep in the little room and look after Aunt Rena. It was no good, Dr. Youree said, for us three to be entrusted with night duty while we were in school.

8

STAN WAS IN THE Guatemala office now, and would be there indefinitely. On my birthday he had sent me a brown leather bag tooled in dark red roses and green leaves. Inside (it's bad luck to give an empty purse) he had put a bag of cacao beans that the Indians sometimes used for money, and a little jade idol.

He had left Galveston without warning. Perhaps the move had been sudden, but I thought not. Stan did not keep in touch with us as he had once done. Still, one could forgive him anything.

I wrote him a long letter giving him all the news of the ranch. I told him about Aunt Rena's attempted flight. Now he could see how necessary it was for him to write and reassure her regarding Julie. Perhaps, since he was not at home, he could have his cousin Edwina do it. Or Edwina's mother, his aunt. They must have loved Aunt Rena.

And I went on:

I don't like deception either. In fact, I hate it—but when it's the doctor's prescription, what can you do?

I want to see Guatemala.

Will you take me sometime—on a fruit boat? I'd like to see where you live, and meet Indians who tool roses on leather, and worship little green idols. I'd like to see a pineapple. And an orchid. And the ocean.

Aunt Rena admires my idol. I've lent it to her. She has my opals too, that Wig gave me. She likes little things like that, to finger and look at while she lies in bed. The days must be very long.

Please write to her.

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

A LETTER from Stan, in Guatemala. He wrote first to me:

As for my house, it's a sky-blue adobe, with a powerful view of volcanoes, and by night all the stars in the universe. Sometimes there's a moon, a monster of white gold that makes me homesick for the Gulf, for the prairies.

There's an arched gate and a walk of moss-grown cobblestones. Mangoes and star apples and coconuts grow in the yard, and, speaking of orchids, they drip from my eaves, little ones, brown and yellow, pink and white and green.

Dagoberto, the monkey, lives in the coconut tree—or did. He belongs to Pindaro and Rosa, the Indian couple who look after me. He goes with the house, and so do they. Dagoberto hates strangers, and dropped a coconut on me when I first came. Pindaro and Rosa were embarrassed. We're good friends now. I bring him nuts, and he chats with me when I come and go.

Rosa sweeps the tiles and rolls out tortillas. She wears a red shirt and a red-striped skirt. Pindaro wears a red shirt and red-striped pants. It's the costume of Todos Santos, their home town.

For excitement—apart from Dagoberto—there's an occasional earthquake. And then I have the cenzontle. That's a bird that sings every morning in the vanilla vine. They say his song is the inspiration of the Indian music.

Besides that, *you* call on me sometimes. You came last night, shortly after your letter. Came through the gate and up the walk, and sat on the porch with me. You were all in white and you had on the new ring Don gave you. It flashed in the starlight. And the stars were in your eyes and in your hair. And we listened to the cenzontle bird. And the dark was sweet with the smell of the coffee flowers.

You see I can get homesick without any moon.

No sense in it. There are plenty of Americans here, tourists and workers. The office people give parties now and then.

I'll write to Aunt Rena, and I'll send her some trinkets.

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

THE NEXT Saturday brought his letter to Aunt Rena and the box of trinkets—a small, red wooden chest packed with bits of Indian pottery and clay figurines in curious colors and shapes.

His letter said:

Heather writes me that you are growing stronger, and that's good news. As for Mother, I never saw her looking better than when I told her good-by. She didn't like my leaving, nor her broken arm, which was still giving her trouble, but in spite of these drawbacks, she was getting ready to entertain the Euchre Club with an all-day party.

You know they come in the morning, bring their finest kimonos, put them on, and play, keen as race horses, stop for lunch, then go at it again. The stakes this time were fans and parasols. . . . Does all this make you hanker for the good old days? Wait till you get well.

I saw the dining-room table, by the way. Mother called my attention to the center-piece—spirea and yellow roses; said she wished Rena could see that combination. She was impatient because her arm wouldn't let her write to you. She would send you telegrams, she said, except that they take so long to get to the ranch.

She has always hoped for another visit from you, but she would never want you to come till you're well. When you do come be sure to let me know ahead, be sure I'm not away, as I may often be from now on. . . . I'll come and get you.

I knew Stan had toiled over that letter, writing about the foolish fans and parasols. . . . "I never saw Mother looking better than when I told her good-by."

It was all true. True enough to deceive Aunt Rena, to put her mind at rest.

* * * *

WINTER CAME early that year. The first norther arrived in October, sending us scurrying for blankets at midnight. With

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

December came wind-driven sleet so sharp that it cut the men's faces and made them bleed. There were days of rain, days of bleak, bitter cold. Terrible blizzards tore in by night, hurling snow and leaving frozen cattle piled against the fences.

A gray Thanksgiving. A wet and freezing Christmas.

Maam said, apparently with an effort, "I will go in to see Rena if she wants me to. Ask her."

I didn't need to ask Aunt Rena. I knew there were two people in the world that she never wanted to see again. One was Maam and the other was Uncle Steve. She had never mentioned their names, but I knew. Perhaps Maam knew it too, knew that the real charity lay in staying away.

She said, "I don't think Rena wants anyone around her but you and Don."

"She wants Julie," I said.

"Yes, Julie. She should be told the truth."

I was sure Maam was trying hard to forgive. But aside from her horror at Aunt Rena's unfaithfulness, she could not forget that it had made a murderer of Uncle Steve.

Did she believe that for her son there would be no forgiveness? That through all eternity she would never see his face?

Once I had said to her, "Did the whale really swallow Jonah?"

"Of course," said Maam. "The Bible says so."

"But I read somewhere that a whale's throat is very small. How could it—"

Maam interrupted me by turning to the Good Book, which I sometimes suspected she knew by heart.

"Look here, child. It says God prepared a great fish. He prepared it. The account says nothing about a whale. The great fish was prepared for its mission. Even so, if the Bible said Jonah swallowed the whale, I'd believe it."

The Bible said that Jesus forgave the Woman. He forgave the thief. There was no record of his forgiving a murderer.

Her son had killed. And Aunt Rena was to blame.

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

ALL AT once it was spring, that green moment of half-coolness before the heat of summer, a summer that arrived in April and was in full tide when examinations began in May. My papers and Zali's would be sent to Sevier College in San Antonio, Don's to the University at Austin. Mr. Boyd appeared to have no qualms about them, though to bolster the weaknesses they betrayed, he left each of us with specific tasks for the summer, mine having to do chiefly with algebra.

* * * *

IN AUGUST Maam had a talk with me. Like most of such talks it took place in the airdome, and for the first time it concerned Hard Times. The subject was not unfamiliar; it had been mentioned periodically and with a certain fatalism. Last year no one heard the phrase; this year, due to the murderous winter, it was everywhere. Lives and fortunes, Maam explained, had been lost in that winter. My own life would suffer change. I could not go away to school. She could see her way to sending only two of us, and those two more frugally than she had planned.

It went harder with Maam than with me. And yet she realized, she said, that the school in San Antonio could not prepare me for my lifework of managing the ranch. She and Uncle Steve would do that, and in the most practical way, here at home.

"And when you come down to it, you have been learning the cattle business, absorbing it, all your life. As for Zali, Sevier College is the place her father had selected for her. He wanted her fitted to teach music. She seems to fall in with the idea. I feel that whatever he planned for her—"

She turned away, and added, "I don't expect you to understand."

I said, "I do understand."

Maam faced me again. I knew she was wondering how much I meant. Did I understand merely that she was assigning to

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

Zali and me our suitable classrooms, or—What did I mean?

I said, "I know. I think it's right—what you are doing."

Something seemed to fall away from Maam's face. Something like a curtain. I saw her eyes—naked, questioning.

"How long have you known?" she asked.

I told her about Wig, how he had talked to me, how Nate had imprisoned him, how Don and I had helped him leave.

"Does Don know?"

Don, I assured her, had not the least suspicion, but was completely mystified by his father's treatment of his mother.

There was silence; then long-sealed words broke from Maam.

"How could he suspect? He thinks his mother is the soul of honor. Don would have to learn of it the way you did, for no sane person would dare tell him, would risk his life even to hint to him why Steve did this thing. . .

"Don must have all the education he will take, must rub up against mature minds, and have the stimulus of college life. As for Zali, I hope she stays in San Antonio. Perhaps she will meet someone and marry there. I am telling them at the school to give her as much freedom as possible, to let her go out socially whenever the opportunity comes."

Silence again.

"No, I am sure no one in San Antonio will tell Zali," Maam went on, seeming to be taking a path she had traveled many times in her mind. "They don't know. It was never in any newspaper. Here, they are bound to know. But not there. Nor in Galveston. Not Stan and his family. No, I need never fear. How hard this must have been for you, Heather. To think, you knew . . . Has it weighed on you? Did it frighten you?"

"Yes, at first. That was why I wanted Wig to go away. I thought if they knew Uncle Steve did it they would hang him. Nate was keeping it secret too."

"Nate didn't know, perhaps, that Steve rode into town that night and gave himself up. No grand jury would have indicted him. Men understand such madness. They guard the right to

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

protect their homes, to destroy the destroyer. It is the Unwritten Law. . . . And you never told Don or Zali."

"I couldn't have told them. I was afraid they might find out."

"Dear child," Maam said, and put her arms around me.

"I'm glad you know. We won't tell Steve, but I'm glad you understand—about Zali. I'll make it up to you," Maam said.

* * * *

DON AND ZALI left shortly after the roundup.

The waddies and Uncle Steve were on the roundup, but the rest of us gathered on the front gallery to see them off. Aunt Rena's bed had been pulled over to the window, that she might watch the wagon as it went down the drive.

"I'm glad for you," Don said, kissing me good-by. We had talked together the night before, and Don had asked that we pledge our vows the tighter, now that he was going away. He could see, he said, as he grew older, what a sensible thing our marriage was going to be.

"And I'm glad you're staying," he told me now, "since you don't want to go."

It was true—I didn't want to go. Still, to see them leaving without me was painful.

"Good-by, Heather." Zali too kissed me. She looked stylish in the new suit and hat. "I'll write to you," she said.

They rode off, waving, into the dawn.

* * * *

THE HOUSE seemed empty. Strangely enough, I missed Zali, missed the sound of her stirring in her room, the drowsy feel of her creeping into my bed in the night; missed her face in the circle about the table at meals. Don's face too, sorely I missed that, having lived with it all my life. No trombone now, crying in the dark; no click of the typewriter that had lately supplanted it.

Only Maam, troubled these days by her rheumatism, keeping

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

more and more to her room, worrying about the ranch, even about things in the kitchen, though Miss Keezy carried on as capably as ever. Only Aunt Rena, lying against her pillows, her green eyes large with hope, waiting for her strength to return.

"Just how long, Doctor?"

"Oh, I can't tell you that, Rena. It depends on how well you behave yourself."

"If I'm good?"

"Well, if you're good, and no monkeyshines, I'd say another month."

That day she wrote Stan, who was back in Galveston, and told him she would be well in a month, and asked him to come for her.

So Stan would be at the Cottonwoods in a month.

I would have missed him if I had gone away to school.

* * * *

DURING THE roundup there was always fall cleaning, delayed this year by the business of getting Don and Zali off to San Antonio, but beginning the Monday after they left. Aunt Rena's room, Maam felt, needed special attention, being so neglected day by day. Ellen and Miss Keezy lifted Aunt Rena to a low, light cot and helped Nate carry her to Don's room, where she had waited the spring before while the cleaning went on.

That was how the inevitable happened.

Aunt Rena, lying in Don's bed, asked Ellen to look through his dresser and see if he had left behind any torn sock, any shirt with buttons off. She felt like sewing for him, Aunt Rena said.

I suppose it is only by fire that we may destroy whatever danger lurks in the written word. All Ellen found in the bureau was a packet of still-unopened letters, and since they were addressed to Aunt Rena, Ellen gave them to her. They were the letters of condolence written to her after the storm. That was how she learned that Julie was gone.

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

She seemed merely stunned at first. Day by day, in her own bed, she read the letters.

"No one tells me how it was," she said to me. "Were they together, Julie and Park? Was her arm still in the cast? Park was a good swimmer. Why couldn't he save them both?"

Maam bade me tell her all that Stan had written us, though not all we had read in the papers. Even that sparse account made the tragic picture so clear in her mind that she slept less and less. Sometimes in a delirium she seemed to be battling the waves with Julie, trying to save her. Dr. Youree could not minister to a mind diseased, but the sedative he left brought quiet of a kind. She would lie at these times looking through the window at the sky.

I knew what she was thinking, what she was asking herself—how could she live out what days and nights remained to her, a captive in this house? How indeed could she live, now that Julie was gone?

* * * *

STAN NEED not come now. Stan might go back to Guatemala without coming for Aunt Rena. I wrote, telling him how things were, and that he needn't come.

Riding for the mail every Saturday, I brought Aunt Rena a letter from Don—a letter filled with news of himself, his classes and his friends, some of it manufactured, I feared, judging by his occasional reports to Maam and me. He was bored at the University, though less than I had expected him to be.

Stan also wrote to her—freely now, picturing his life as he was endeavoring to reclaim it. His home was gone, but she would be glad to know that the house in which she and Julie had been born was still standing. He told her about the sea wall the city was building, a gigantic concrete structure stretching for six miles along the beach. "I hope you'll want to come and see what we are doing. I expect to be here for another three months, and will come for you whenever you are well enough to make the trip."

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

There was also an invitation from Stan's Aunt Lila, with whom he was staying. "The sea air is strength-giving," Aunt Lila wrote. "Come as soon as you can. We all want to see you."

Aunt Rena read the letters and laid them away.

* * * *

ZALI WROTE too, dutiful letters addressed to Maam, who was pleased to know that she stood well in her classes, that Herr von Bickler, her music teacher, was highly encouraging. No doubt Maam would have liked even more to hear that on some week end Zali had met an eligible young man and become engaged. Week ends, however, were generally spent with a Mrs. Ramón, lately widowed and not interested in social life. Mrs. Ramón, we learned, was a cousin of Zali's father.

"I'll give Zali the dress, of course," said Maam.

Zali had asked for another party dress, the one she had being too informal. "Beside, I've worn it every time, and this is a cotillion. I have to get your special permission to go to it. It's on a Friday night, and the Archers are friends of Vanessa's."

Vanessa Craddock, a special student like herself, had taken a fancy to Zali. Her father was the oil-rich Jay Craddock, and to the regret of Sevier's faculty, he and his friends were endeavoring to make Vanessa's school days as lively as possible.

"I hope the Craddock girl isn't giving Zali any wrong ideas," Maam said.

Zali wrote me later about the cotillion given by Vanessa's friends, the Archers:

Ned Archer and a boy named Casey Bonham came for us in Mrs. Archer's carriage, with coachman in livery and high-stepping gray horses. I knew the girls were watching from the windows as we went down the lighted drive.

I hadn't time to have my dress made, so I got it at Joske's—a peach-colored net over taffeta—and Casey sent me a corsage of dark red roses. Ned gave Vanessa pink ones, her dress being blue, and for the occasion her father had sent her

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

a new bracelet—diamonds, if you please. So out of place, and Vanessa looks like a baby with her blue eyes and blonde ringlets. Diamonds don't suit her, and besides we're only schoolgirls.

Maam said she could see Zali was keeping her head.

Zali described the dance and the wonderful time she had. I pictured her in the peach-colored net. Another world. A whirling, golden world. I wondered how she could go back to her books, and practicing.

* * * *

I ANSWERED Zali's letter, telling her what news there was. Maam's rheumatism, Aunt Rena's learning the truth about Julie, and how she would never go back to Galveston with Julie gone.

I'm being taught ranching by Maam, who discovered that I know a lot about it already, which surprised me more than it did her. We discuss crossbreeding, the packers' trust, the everlasting freight rates and grazing rights.

Nate trapped a wolf in the canyon, and there was a grass fire west of the schoolhouse. A Mr. and Mrs. Rix have been here. They are from the Bonanza outfit in Arizona and they are traveling about the state studying how we ranch. They invited me to return the visit and observe Bonanza ways. Maam says I can if I want to.

Stan's back in Guatemala. He sent me a beautiful pair of boots for my birthday. Did I tell you I'm riding cross-saddle? Mrs. Rix told Maam that the women in Arizona were doing it, so Maam told me to go ahead. I ordered me some riding knickers, and with the new boots they look all right. Maam says we've come a long way since Mrs. Hutchie rode into town in men's pants and got arrested.

One trip I'm certain of, but not till March. Uncle Steve is going then to the Cattlemen's Convention in Fort Worth and I'm going too.

9

WINTER CAME SLOWLY that year, a winter of few northers, of mild sunshine and much moonlight. At Christmas I gathered roses from Aunt Rena's neglected bushes in the patio. On New Year's Day a flock of redbirds scattered themselves over a new-fallen snow in the ranch-house yard, and clustered like fruit in the bare branches of the cottonwoods.

Don came home for the holidays, but Zali elected to stay with Mrs. Ramón in San Antonio. Don sat often by his mother's bed, finding her thinner, paler, since the knowledge of Julie's death. He left at last, reluctantly. I think he did not expect to see her alive again.

January slipped into February, and we'd had only two northers, only one fall of snow. "Green winter, fat graveyard." Maam quoted the ancient adage for no reason at all, unless she meant that her rheumatism, which had become very painful, appeared to thrive in mild weather.

Meanwhile, no matter how she felt, I was still to attend the Cattlemen's Convention, and to that end she sent me into town with Nate to buy a new spring outfit.

Martin's Department Store was just unpacking a new shipment when I arrived. I selected a light-weight suit in the new "gold nugget" shade, a brown straw hat, brown shoes and gloves. The bag Stan had given me went well with it all; so did my topaz bracelet. Maam approved of my purchases, and Aunt Rena's eyes shone with pleasure.

On Saturday I brought Maam a letter from Sevier College in San Antonio. A bill, I surmised, or some report on Zali's progress; yet when I had gone out, Maam after a few moments called me back. Her face was pale, but not with physical pain.

Zali had been expelled.

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

Maam handed me the letter. It was from Miss Ann Clayton, the principal, and it stated that the school would keep the matter quiet, and, despite the evidence, no charges would be pressed. Zali, Miss Clayton implied, was a thief.

Maam, already furious with the rheumatism, became furious with Sevier College.

"It's a libel," said Maam. "We know Zali."

Could I explain this terrible thing? I thought I could.

"You remember how her father wanted someone with her at night because she walked in her sleep? When she walked she took things. She said it was always something she wanted—she used the word 'coveted.' One night she filled our bed with peaches. Next day she cried about it." (Should I tell about that night we camped out and she left me and went to Don? No, that was different. She hadn't stolen Don.)

"She used to lock her door," I said, "and give me the key. But she hasn't walked in her sleep for so long I thought she'd outgrown it. Maybe something tempted her. I'm sure if Zali stole anything it was in her sleep."

Fantastic as this explanation must have sounded, Maam grasped at it at once.

She dispatched Nate to the Sun-up with a telegram to Miss Clayton asking that she defer any further action till we had talked with her, and another message to Zali assuring her that one of us would be there soon.

It was plain that Maam would have liked to be that one—Conn of a Hundred Fights marching on Sevier College. Since this could not be, she would have made Uncle Steve her deputy. But Uncle Steve was due to preside at the Cattlemen's Convention, with all the causes he sponsored coming up for action or discussion. It would be useless to suggest his going to San Antonio.

There was no one left but me. "Perhaps," said Maam, "you're the right one, after all—able to give a first-hand explanation, such as it is. . . I knew Zali walked in her sleep, but I thought nothing of it. She has probably restored whatever she

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

took. If she lost it or broke it, tell Miss Clayton we will pay for it. In any case, it's ridiculous to hold a girl responsible for anything she says or does in her sleep."

* * * *

THE CATTLEMEN'S Convention met without me, and as a representative of Zali's guardians, I fared to San Antonio.

It had been seven years since I paid my first visit to that city of winding streets and walled gardens and languid river wandering about the town.

Almost automatically I retraced the steps that Maam and Don and I had taken to the historic Menger Hotel. There I was given a room with a canopied bed and a bath and clothes closet built for titans. Long French windows opened over a flower-packed courtyard, where I had lunch after telephoning the college and learning that Miss Clayton could not see me for two hours. At the appointed moment my cab rolled through the shaded grounds that Zali in her letters had described so well. I was nervous about my errand, which, like many of the responsibilities that had fallen to me, seemed out of proportion to my wits and experience.

Miss Clayton received me in her office. She was an imposing woman, wearing the prevailing pompadour and a gold pince-nez with a black cord fastened to her plain gray dress. She had seemed surprised that it was not Maam or Uncle Steve who had come to see about Zali and the appraisal of her cool blue eyes did not reassure me.

Zali, Miss Clayton informed me, had left the school, was with her relative Mrs. Ramón. She added that Zali's felony had been a grave one.

"She took jewelry—diamonds worth a great deal of money. Of course the school is no place for such valuables, and we have been keeping this bracelet in the office safe. The girl who owns it—Vanessa Craddock—wore it when she went with Zali to a moonlight barbecue. There is no doubt about the thief.

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

However, we have acted quietly in view of the fact that Miss Duval has been a model student. It was not a public expulsion. Even Vanessa doesn't know where her bracelet was found. She discovered her loss next morning and made quite a disturbance. I called her into the office and asked her if anyone had seen where she put the bracelet when she took it off. She said Zali had seen, but Zali would never have told.

"No one knows the facts except me and the maid who virtually witnessed Zali in the act, a maid who has been with us for years, and can be relied on not to repeat anything that would injure the college, or a student's reputation. Zali should be punished, of course, and reformed, but that is not my province. I am acting only in the interests of the school. I have also given every protection to your—I don't really know the relationship between Zali and your family."

"She's my grandmother's ward." Maam had told me to say that. "Her parents are dead."

"I know," said Miss Clayton. "I knew her father when he taught in the Military Academy here. I was sorry to read of his death. It was for his sake, as well as because of Zali's record here, that I've been so disturbed by this."

I asked her if the bracelet had been taken in the night.

She replied that it had. "The girls got home from the barbecue at eleven—a rule of the school—and went to bed. The maid I spoke of saw Zali come out of Vanessa's room around two o'clock in the morning. She had something in her hand, that much was plain, but Marie—the maid—did not connect the incident with the theft, even when Vanessa raised such an outcry. It was not until three days later when we both—Marie and I—went to look over Zali's mattress. The young ladies make their own beds, but Zali had complained of her mattress some time before, said it was too hard.

"There was the bracelet, hidden between the mattress and the springs. I think I have never had such a shock. Marie told me then about seeing Zali come out of Vanessa's room. I came

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

back to the office and sent for Zali. I must say she's an excellent actress. The bracelet was here on my desk, and she looked at it as if pleased to see it again. When I told her where we had found it, that she had been seen coming out of Vanessa's room in the night, she denied things furiously, and fell to weeping and to saying rash things. I realize how easy it may be to suspect—to accuse—Marie. I can only repeat that Marie has had every opportunity to steal. The girls are always leaving money and jewelry around. She is scrupulously honest. That I know."

"It was Zali," I said. "Zali walks in her sleep. That's when she takes things. But I thought she was over it, and she never took anything of value, just something she liked."

I told Miss Clayton about the peaches hidden in our bed. I shall never forget the skepticism in her eyes. This then would be our contention, that Zali was unconscious when she stole.

After a moment she pressed the electric bell beside her desk, pressed it twice.

Her eyes challenged me.

"How long has Zali been doing this?" she asked.

"All her life, I guess. They were living at the Cottonwoods, not far from the ranch house. Zali used to spend the night with me sometimes. Her father asked us not to let her sleep alone because of that—that way she had of walking in her sleep. He seemed afraid something might happen to her. After he died she came to live with us and had her own room, opening on mine. At night she always locked her hall door and gave me the key. She wanted it that way."

"We don't allow locked doors here," said Miss Clayton. "We don't give out keys for the bedroom doors."

Had Zali asked for a key, and did Miss Clayton remember?

A woman had come in. Middle-aged, compact, capable-looking. She wore a black uniform and a white cap.

"Marie," said Miss Clayton, "this is Miss Roy, a friend of Miss Duval's. I'd like you to tell us how Miss Duval looked that night when you were making your check of the halls and saw her coming out of Miss Craddock's room."

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

"She was in her nightgown," Marie answered. "She was holding something—this way," clasping her hands against her breast. "I could see something bright through her fingers. And she was barefooted."

"How did she look?" asked Miss Clayton. "Her face, that is. Her eyes. I know the corridor was well-lighted."

"Yes, it was lighted. I could see her plain. Her eyes? She was looking straight ahead of her. She looked at me too, when I faced her. But she acted like she didn't see me."

"What did you say to her?"

"I don't remember. I think I said, 'Why, Miss Duval!'—meaning, 'I'm surprised to see you.' Because I knew the young ladies aren't supposed to be out of their rooms after ten o'clock."

"And she didn't answer you?"

"No, Miss Clayton. She just walked straight on. After we found the—Well, afterwards I thought she hadn't spoken to me because she didn't want me to ask her what she had in her hands. But right then I thought it was because she considered I didn't have the right to speak to her like that. Then when we changed the mattress—"

"All right, Marie. Thank you."

"It still puzzles me," Miss Clayton said at last, "that your family should have allowed a girl with this—this disorder—to live away from home. Didn't they realize a thing like this might happen?"

"No, they never saw Zali walk in her sleep. I did, but it was so long ago. Her father expected her to outgrow it, and she'd had time to do that."

I felt more at ease now. I could see Miss Clayton believed me.

She said, "I wish Zali herself had told me this. Instead of crying and denying and accusing, I wish she had told me how it happened. I might have managed to keep her in the school."

"I guess it would be hard," I ventured, "to confess something you don't remember doing—something so serious."

Again Miss Clayton was silent.

"Since Zali's school record is good," she said presently, "and



MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

since the end of the term is so near, I wonder if you might manage to come and be with her during these final months? We will put another bed in the room, and give you a key."

I said, "It won't happen again."

"That's what you thought before," she answered. "I agree with you that Zali is innocent of the intent to steal, but can't you see that the effect is the same as if she were broad awake? Private property is not safe. I'd like Zali to finish the term, and I would rather not put one of the other girls with her, or explain the matter to someone else. I'm sure you can come."

The idea did not appeal to me. I told Miss Clayton that I would take the matter up with my grandmother, certain Maam would agree that the suggestion went beyond the call of duty. Still, Miss Clayton would re-admit Zali under no other conditions. She appeared to expect us both inside a week.

Our adieus were friendly. She sent me in the school surrey to call on Zali at Mrs. Ramón's home.

* * * *

MRS. RAMÓN'S home was in one of the walled gardens of San Antonio. There was a bell beside the iron gate, and a Mexican boy let me in.

For some reason, in remembering Zali, I see her as she was that day against the background of that shadowy Spanish house, with its dark-beamed ceiling, its high-backed chairs and dimly-colored portraits. I remember a white chimney with ebony mantelshelf, and a tall, gravely ticking clock flanked by silver candlesticks. I see Zali, her pale, pointed face folded in the wings of black hair, her dark eyes large with tears. She had on a pale-yellow dress that accentuated her thinness; her slight, helpless-looking hands twisted the handkerchief in her lap, as she answered me uncertainly as to what she meant to do.

I, who had been cold to Miss Clayton's suggestion, felt myself weakening.

I told her about Miss Clayton's proposal. "I'll never go back," Zali said.

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

"But she understands now. Miss Clayton understands. I mean—"

"I know what you mean. You told her I walk in my sleep. If I took Vanessa's bracelet in my sleep—I took it. Miss Clayton accepts that servant's word. She refuses to accuse Marie. Well, I accuse Marie. She stole it and laid it on me."

"Why would she want to harm you?" I asked.

"I don't say she wanted to harm me. I say she wanted the bracelet. Then, with all the noise Vanessa made, she got scared and put it in my bed. How could I go back there now?"

"But no one knows. Miss Clayton kept the whole thing in her own hands. Not even Vanessa knows."

"Vanessa does know—because I told her. She knows it was Marie who took her bracelet. She's furious about the whole thing, and she may leave Sevier herself. But *you* side against me. Of course you're remembering the peaches. I suppose I'll never live that down with you. But something valuable like that bracelet is different. It makes you want to kill yourself."

Despair was in her eyes. I began to think she might be right, that Marie had taken the bracelet after all.

Was I to tell Miss Clayton, then, that she would not return under any conditions? Yes, said Zali. She asked that I not say anything to Cousin Beatrice (Mrs. Ramón) about the peaches, and I said I wouldn't. I was a little tired of them anyhow.

It was not until I was ready to leave that Mrs. Ramón came in. She insisted that I stay to dinner, and afterward, if I wished, Benito, the Mexican boy, would drive me back to my hotel. In the meantime, she would show me the garden.

"I make Zali lie down every evening before dinner," she explained as we went out into the sunset along the flagstone paths. "A tragic experience. Ann Clayton is not an unjust person. She really believes that Zali—Of course the evidence was against the child. But Zali—it's unthinkable. And now Miss Clayton wants her to come back. You must have pleaded well."

"I merely convinced her that Zali's not a thief."

"That horrible word. Of course it was the maid. Still, it would

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

be better for Zali to go back. There'll be speculation if she doesn't. The girls will ask, 'Why did she leave just at this time?' Zali knows this, but she can't bring herself to go back. I know how she must feel."

"She can still keep up her music," I said.

"Oh, yes. Your uncle's generosity has been a fine, an unusual, thing. I could not have helped Zali at the time. I was in the hospital when her father died."

Over our heads the huisache trees spread their fire-gold tents. Wisteria and red bougainvillea climbed the wall. There were masses of poppies and lantanas, irises and yellow jasmine, flowering pomegranate and Cherokee roses. Mrs. Ramón told me their names, for I had never seen such a garden. From beyond the wall came now and then a noise of wheels and of the feet of horses. There was a nearer sound of rain, and we came on a fountain among the phlox and delphinium.

With her white hair and white dress, Mrs. Ramón seemed the quiet spirit of the garden. You felt that nothing had ever come through that gate but messages of peace. Yet I knew that her son had been killed at the battle of San Juan, that her husband had died the same year, and her own illness followed. Surely many other troubles had entered here, and now came Zali, who brought a trouble so ironic that it left you helpless and angry. . . . Yes, the school would wonder if Zali did not return. If she went back everything would be smoothed out.

Dinner in the long dining room, the darkness lit by clusters of twinkling candles. Great dishes of Spanish silver, flavorsome foods, fruit and wine.

I parted with Zali that evening, knowing nothing of what she meant to do since she was unable to make plans. She said only that she would not return to Sevier, and that I might take that message to Miss Clayton.

* * * *

I REACHED home on a Thursday with nothing to report.

Once more I had seen Zali. Though calmer, she was still un-

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

willing to return to Sevier. I did not close that door, however, by giving her message to Miss Clayton. I thought I'd better leave that to Maam.

Maam pronounced Zali a quitter. However, she wrote Miss Clayton that Zali's feeling must decide the matter, and Zali preferred not to return.

Uncle Steve, arriving home on Friday asked what Zali meant to do. So far as I knew, she was remaining with Mrs. Ramón.

I thought Aunt Rena looked better as she lay listening to the account of my trip. "And you didn't see Don?" she asked. "I kept hoping you would see Don."

"Don's in Austin," I reminded her.

"But that's nearby. You should have gone. I'm worried about Don."

* * * *

THE NEXT mail brought me a letter from Don. I read it riding back from the stage in my new boots and knickers, jogging placidly along. Some involuntary movement of my hand made Piper stop in the road, or perhaps he felt the shock that went through me.

Don wrote from San Antonio. Zali had written him, had asked him to come, and he had gone. It was not the first time. He had seen her now and then on week ends and he had stopped off at Christmastime on his way back to Austin.

I guess I always loved her, but I didn't realize it till I saw her this last time. The injustice that had been done her, the cruelty she had endured—

He needn't have gone further. I too had seen Zali, her pallor and tears, her confusion.

They had been married five days when he wrote the letter. Mrs. Ramón had lent them her home for their honeymoon, had gone on a long-deferred visit to Corpus Christi, had given them a check for a wedding present.

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

be better for Zali to go back. There'll be speculation if she doesn't. The girls will ask, 'Why did she leave just at this time?' Zali knows this, but she can't bring herself to go back. I know how she must feel."

"She can still keep up her music," I said.

"Oh, yes. Your uncle's generosity has been a fine, an unusual, thing. I could not have helped Zali at the time. I was in the hospital when her father died."

Over our heads the huisache trees spread their fire-gold tents. Wisteria and red bougainvillea climbed the wall. There were masses of poppies and lantanas, irises and yellow jasmine, flowering pomegranate and Cherokee roses. Mrs. Ramón told me their names, for I had never seen such a garden. From beyond the wall came now and then a noise of wheels and of the feet of horses. There was a nearer sound of rain, and we came on a fountain among the phlox and delphinium.

With her white hair and white dress, Mrs. Ramón seemed the quiet spirit of the garden. You felt that nothing had ever come through that gate but messages of peace. Yet I knew that her son had been killed at the battle of San Juan, that her husband had died the same year, and her own illness followed. Surely many other troubles had entered here, and now came Zali, who brought a trouble so ironic that it left you helpless and angry. . . . Yes, the school would wonder if Zali did not return. If she went back everything would be smoothed out.

Dinner in the long dining room, the darkness lit by clusters of twinkling candles. Great dishes of Spanish silver, flavorsome foods, fruit and wine.

I parted with Zali that evening, knowing nothing of what she meant to do since she was unable to make plans. She said only that she would not return to Sevier, and that I might take that message to Miss Clayton.

* * * *

I REACHED home on a Thursday with nothing to report.

Once more I had seen Zali. Though calmer, she was still un-

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

willing to return to Sevier. I did not close that door, however, by giving her message to Miss Clayton. I thought I'd better leave that to Maam.

Maam pronounced Zali a quitter. However, she wrote Miss Clayton that Zali's feeling must decide the matter, and Zali preferred not to return.

Uncle Steve, arriving home on Friday asked what Zali meant to do. So far as I knew, she was remaining with Mrs. Ramón.

I thought Aunt Rena looked better as she lay listening to the account of my trip. "And you didn't see Don?" she asked. "I kept hoping you would see Don."

"Don's in Austin," I reminded her.

"But that's nearby. You should have gone. I'm worried about Don."

* * * *

THE NEXT mail brought me a letter from Don. I read it riding back from the stage in my new boots and knickers, jogging placidly along. Some involuntary movement of my hand made Piper stop in the road, or perhaps he felt the shock that went through me.

Don wrote from San Antonio. Zali had written him, had asked him to come, and he had gone. It was not the first time. He had seen her now and then on week ends and he had stopped off at Christmastime on his way back to Austin.

I guess I always loved her, but I didn't realize it till I saw her this last time. The injustice that had been done her, the cruelty she had endured—

He needn't have gone further. I too had seen Zali, her pallor and tears, her confusion.

They had been married five days when he wrote the letter. Mrs. Ramón had lent them her home for their honeymoon, had gone on a long-deferred visit to Corpus Christi, had given them a check for a wedding present.

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

Try to understand, Heather, as I would understand if this had happened to you. It is strange to be loved as Zali loves me, strange and intoxicating. It is strange to love a woman in this way.

We are leaving for the Cottonwoods on Monday. Zali wanted to surprise you all, but I felt we should write first and tell you what's happened. Zali is writing to Maam. I had meant to write to Mother, but I think I'll tell her when we come.

He signed the letter as he had signed all the others.

With love,

Don

P.S. After all, Zali wasn't able to write. I'm rushing to get this in the mail. Share it with Maam. Zali sends love.

I sat still in the saddle, my mind seeming hardly to grasp what I had read. Married. Five days. Five days they had been in that shadowy house, that enchanted garden, so folded in each other, so enraptured, that they had not even thought to let us know.

Piper and I jogged on, and I thought, Who now will run the ranch? Not I, in spite of Charlie's debt. The agreement was that I would do Don's work only as the wife of Don.

I guess I always loved her. Yes, he had written that. How could you love somebody and not know it? How could you bury that love so deep that it would not be ready to rise and take you to the loved one if he called you or came toward you?

Steve had not come; he had not called. But he had said, "Are you glad, Heather? Are you glad you're not free?" He himself had not been glad.

Now I was free, flying along the road, galloping as Piper had never galloped, halting only at the ranch-house steps.

There suddenly I remembered. There it came over me like a black cloud falling. Don and Zali. Married—with all that lay

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

between them. It should never have been. It should never have been.

And Maam, to whom I was taking this letter. What would she do? What would she say? And Aunt Rena—

It was a long time before I could go in.

* * * *

MAAM SAID, "It's done. They've been married a week. We'll have to accept that. Is this a complete surprise to you, Heather?"

I said that it was. I had known that Zali liked Don. "I think she was in love with him from the start. But I never thought that Don—"

"She is the strange woman of the Bible," said Maam. "A dark current is in her blood, mysterious, generations old. . . You never know. . . Not that I hadn't thought of this. I asked Don once if he considered Zali pretty—once when he was in an open mood. He said she was too skinny. Of course she has improved since then, and more than once I've seen the effect she has on men."

Maam was talking to herself, getting out of bed, wincing only a little, beginning to dress.

"Don was already engaged. He might never have thought of her if she'd let him alone. She wrote to him, leaned on him. . . Strange women that don't belong here," said Maam. "They will destroy us."

I knew she was thinking of Aunt Rena, too, and perhaps indeed Aunt Rena should never have come. Yet Zali belonged with Don. They belonged together. Don may not have known this, but Zali knew.

They belonged together, except for the abyss between them, the abyss they did not see.

"This shatters my plans, my hopes," said Maam. "No wonder Zali couldn't write to me. . . But what can we do? Nothing. Nothing—except pray that they never know—never wake up."

Sometime that day she told Uncle Steve. When I saw him I knew that he knew.

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

I MUST tell Stan. I must write to Stan.

No one was riding into town, and the mail stage would not pass for another week. I decided to wire him from the Sun-up. He was in Galveston now, I reflected, and would get the message before night. I composed it as I rode.

"Don married Zali five days ago. I'm free and I'm glad."

Mrs. Gratz, whose husband ran the Sun-up and who always lingered in earshot when anybody came to telephone, tried to help me.

"That's three words too many, dear. 'I'm' is 'I am.' They always write it out."

I hung up the receiver and rang off. Let them write it out.

"Don and Zali," Mrs. Gratz said thoughtfully, dazedly. She was a motherly woman with nothing to mother except cows, and though she knew all the affairs of her neighbors, she didn't gossip much. "It kind of—it upsets me," she admitted. Then hastily, "With you two engaged, and all."

She gave me a bottle of dewberry cordial to take to Aunt Rena.



DON AND ZALI RETURNED on Monday, Nate making his monthly trip ahead of schedule in order to meet their train. They came glowing, though with something of appeal in their eyes, like children guilty of a misdemeanor. I can still see them standing in the hall, Don handsomer than ever, his arm around Zali, and Zali, in the dark-blue suit and a modish toque, her eyes shining through its bit of veil.

Uncle Steve shook their hands. Maam kissed them, and so did I. Everybody joined in giving them a welcome, yet even they must have felt its disturbed undercurrent. Almost at once they went in to see Aunt Rena. She was awake, Don told me afterward, and overjoyed to see them. The news of their marriage subdued her at once. She kept saying, "No, no. It can't be."

"We broke it to her carefully," he said. "I guess we should have let you tell her before we came."

Don and Zali were given the south guest room. During the days they were there they rode out together or walked, arms linked, in the wood. About the house or at the table they seemed in a sort of trance. Uncle Steve appeared to ignore them, but Maam was kind. She was praying that they might never wake.

Stan's writing to me, I thought. He's writing a long letter.

* * * *

DON AND I talked, sitting in the patio. How beautiful happiness could make one. There was something new in Don's face, as if a light had been kindled behind it.

I asked him about his plans, and he leaned back in the old hickory patio-chair, clasping his hands behind his head, looking up at the sky. That was another word he didn't like. Plans. He

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

and Zali had talked about the future, of course. She would like to live in San Antonio, at least part of the time. Right now they weren't sure. Everything had happened so fast.

He leaned forward and took my hands.

"Heather," he said, "you *have* forgiven me. I can see it in your face. You didn't really want what Maam had planned. You seemed not to mind—that was all. But I feel—I feel as if I'd betrayed you, as if I should have told you first—only there wasn't time. You do understand," his dark eyes searching mine.

"I do, Don. And it leaves me free. I like being free."

"Of course. And someday you too may find—"

I withdrew a hand to take his ring out of my shirtwaist pocket.

"I want you to give this to Zali," I said. I had noticed that Zali had only her wedding band.

"I can't," he answered at once. "She'd recognize it."

"You can have it reset," I said. "She'll never know the difference. Please. I mustn't keep it."

He took it reluctantly, put it in his wallet. A moment later Zali came into the patio, fresh from her nap, wearing the yellow dress she had worn that day in San Antonio. He went to her as she came. Shining eyes met shining eyes, and presently with no words at all they wandered off into the wood.

That night Aunt Rena asked me about the marriage. Was it a shock? Had I ever thought they might do this?

She seemed absorbed now in thoughts of the marriage, eased of her grief for Julie.

* * * *

WHEN A week had passed, Uncle Steve decided that the days of grace for the bride and groom were over.

The waddies had company that night, some of the boys from the Picador outfit. After supper they played poker around the dining-room table. Ellen was eating with Miss Keezy in the kitchen, and Zali had gone to her room to write a long-delayed letter to Mrs. Ramón. Maam and Don and I were in the sitting

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

room when Uncle Steve came in, closed the hall door and sat down. Presently he asked Don what he meant to do.

"You have married and left the University," he said. "How do you propose to support your wife?"

Don, standing beside the window, was silent, waiting it seemed for his father to say more, to enlarge on what was a natural question.

"Are you riding out with the punchers," asked Uncle Steve, obliging him, "or will you do the buying and the bookkeeping, or run the farm? I can use you if you are capable, but I'll pay you no wages unless you are."

Don said, "You ought to know, sir, that I'm a no-good puncher, a no-good farmer, a no-good anything around the ranch."

"You could learn couldn't you?" said Uncle Steve. "Taking a wife, you take on obligations. You're no good at ranching and farming because you don't want to be. A lot of people don't like the hand they get in life, but they've got to play it if they're going to sit in at the game."

Don said with the dark look I remembered from the old air-dome days, "I guess I won't sit in."

Maam looked at him, but couldn't catch his eye.

"I can get a reporting job on the *San Antonio Light*," he said to his father. "I went up to see them when I was there. It's not much, but I'd rather do it than punch or farm."

"No," said Maam, and we all looked at her. "You'll never do the other if you do that."

"What other?" asked Uncle Steve, and I knew that Maam had never told him her plans for Don.

She began to tell him now. She said, "Your son is a genius," and Uncle Steve said, "My God." She said "I have the word of one who knew." She didn't tell him who that one was. She said that Don should be allowed to develop in his own way, that marriage, whatever its obligations, should not stop him.

"When we are gone," she said to Uncle Steve, "when you and I are gone, Heather will take over the Cottonwoods."

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

Uncle Steve stood up. Now he knew all that Maam had been working toward, all she had in her mind. His eyes rested on Don, then on me. He seemed about to speak, but turned his head and was silent, looking at the door that led into the passageway.

It could not be true, I thought, for Aunt Rena was standing in the doorway. She stood tall and white, her hair falling around her shoulders, a loose robe gathered about her.

Maam was the first to rally, crying out, "Rena! What are you doing?" She said to Don, "Take her back to bed."

Aunt Rena spoke quietly.

"I heard you talking" she said. "I belong in this conference about my son."

And leaning on Don, she came into the room, and Maam shut the door behind her. No one could deny her right there.

Uncle Steve stood and watched her come.

"The sofa," said Maam. "Put her on the sofa."

She cleared away a newspaper and some books.

But Aunt Rena would not lie down. She sat in a corner of the sofa, and Don stood beside her. I thought, she looks better. She's going to get well. There moved through my mind a thought like a song. This is the end of sorrow. For the mask had fallen from my uncle as he watched his wife. You could see his face, you could read it as you could read other faces. You saw wonder there, and compassion, and something more.

Was he shocked by her appearance? To me who had been with her every day she looked beautiful, as if a light had flamed up inside her, but Uncle Steve had not seen her for three years. She'll be herself in a little while, I thought, while Maam nervously reminded us that Dr. Youree had forbidden Rena to leave her bed.

"I know," Aunt Rena answered. "The important thing is that I say what I have to say."

"And what is that, Rena?" Maam said urgently.

"It is this," Aunt Rena answered. "Don must do what he was meant to do. No one can decide for him what that is."

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

"He must go if he needs to go," she said. "He will come back, and if he stays he must do his own work. This is a ranch, I know, but he must not be driven with the herd. Great things have been done on ranches, and I think my son will write great books."

Maam said, "That's what I've believed all along, Rena. I've fought for Don. I'm training Heather to take over in his place."

"I'm speaking for Heather too," Aunt Rena said, her eyes resting on me.

"You can't speak for Heather," Maam said, bridling. "Heather is not yours."

"Heather has been mine from the day she was born," Aunt Rena said. "I've never known the difference. I say that you may train her, but when you and Steve are gone she must not feel she has to carry on your work. What does it matter if the Cottonwoods passes into other hands? It may not be her destiny as it was yours. She must be allowed to go if she wants to go."

"I know you've fought for Don," Aunt Rena said to Maam. "They must both be free."

She looked at Uncle Steve.

There was silence.

"She wants you to promise her, Steve," Maam said.

Uncle Steve answered, "If that's how you feel, Rena. If that's what you want."

"That's not all," Aunt Rena answered. She straightened herself, and I knew it was getting hard for her. "I want the light turned on in this house," she said. "I want you to tell the whole truth to Don—now, now while I can hear you, and know that he knows."

Maam said, "Rena, this is frightful."

"Frightful or not, if it's the truth and affects other people, then it should be told. They shouldn't be left in darkness to stumble and hurt themselves. Like when Julie died. Like Don and Zali marrying each other—"

"I never," said Maam, "wanted you deceived about Julie. But Don and Zali—Besides, it's too late now."

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

"For God's sake," Don said, "what *is* this? What is it I don't know?"

Aunt Rena looked again at Uncle Steve.

"Tell him," she said. And I saw that he wanted to tell, for when he spoke, it was with the voice of one dropping a burden. He told his son that he had killed Duval, that the act had all but killed his wife, that everyone thereabouts knew—everyone except Don himself and Zali.

And Don, shocked, said, "Why? And why was there no trial?"

It was Maam who answered.

"The unwritten law," she said.

Don looked down at his mother, and her courage served her still.

"We were lovers," she said. "He found us together. . . . Don't judge us yet, us or your father. Not yet," she said.

And Don, paler than I had ever seen him, answered. "I always knew there was something hidden and terrible. I felt it. I don't judge you or Dad. I never will. I think I can understand how it was—with both of you."

Suddenly he said, "Zali. Zali must never know."

"Zali should have known from the first," Aunt Rena said.

And Don, "She would not have married me."

"Perhaps not," Aunt Rena answered. "She should have known."

"Not yet. Not yet," he said. "Someday I'll tell her. Someday," he promised.

Aunt Rena said, "Your wife is a stranger here—as I was. There's loneliness in being a stranger. Don't let her feel it—ever."

"No, Mother."

Silence, and then my uncle's voice.

"Rena, can't we—"

He had come closer to her, and her eyes turned to him, dark and shining.

Smiling, she held out her hand, then drew it back, pressing

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

it to her side in a gesture I remembered. She leaned against Don and closed her eyes.

Don looked down at her. "Mother," he said, as if trying to wake her. And again, questioningly, "Mother?"

After a moment Uncle Steve gathered her into his arms and carried her across the passage to her bed.

I didn't know till then that she was gone.

* * * *

THE LONG night. The long night when there was no sound in the world, only silence between the earth and the stars. Miss Keezy moving with her candle out of Maam's room, her arm around the weeping Ellen. Behind the closed door of their room Uncle Steve sat all night beside his wife.

Don came to me in the patio, after Zali, striving to comfort him, had fallen asleep. We sat there in the dark, silent, or speaking of Aunt Rena in whispers. The night felt strange. We had never known a world without her.

* * * *

AT DAWN they dressed her in her wedding gown. Maam said it was a strange thing to do after all these years, but it was Uncle Steve's wish.

Maam telegraphed Stan in Galveston. But there would not be time for him to come.

We laid our dead away quickly in those days.

11

MID-APRIL. A LAVISH SPRING. Lavish and wild and windy. Maam, almost herself these days, was making arrangements for me to go to Arizona, to visit the Rix Ranch near Phoenix.

"You've never had a real trip," Maam said. "A real change. Your Uncle Steve feels just as I do. You may go into town and buy anything you think you'll need."

A new saddle was all I could think of. I'd been using Don's old one since I gave up my sidesaddle.

Somehow I couldn't get interested in the Rix Ranch. But Maam went on with her plans.

Riding out one morning, I turned away from the road that led toward the Ridge and the dugout, past the canyon and Wig's cabin. As always now, I took the trail to the farm, and up into the hills. The hills were a world in themselves, quieting, remote, with no reminders, no associations. This was where Uncle Steve rode at times, where Stan had ridden the night before I packed his bag on his last visit to the ranch. I thought of how he had come out of the wood that night, stopping to speak with Don and me as we sat beside the path.

Why did he not write me in answer to my telegram in March?

Why did he not write now in answer to Maam's telegram?

Beyond the farm, I came on Don and Uncle Steve riding also into the hills. I turned back, marveling that Don and Zali lingered still at the ranch when they might have started on their wanderings. Don rode often with his father now. They talked together as I had never seen them do.

In the evening Don and Zali studied maps, though often I

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

heard them say, laughing, they wanted no destination when they went, and no date of return.

When would he tell her, I wondered, uneasy in my heart. Perhaps in some far-distant place with the date of their return uncertain.

* * * *

THE DATE of their return was always uncertain in those wander-years, but return they did at times. Both their sons were born at the ranch. Two of Don's books were written there.

But it was not until Uncle Steve died and their older boy had stepped into his shoes that Don told his wife. It went hard with her even then, for in those latter years she had come close to Uncle Steve, as we all had.

She said, "We must not tell the children." But their children knew already. That is, they were aware of the rumors, the legends, that still hung darkly about the Cottonwoods. It is at the behest of their children's children that I have written Aunt Rena's story. They are of the clear-eyed race that asks the truth at whatever cost.

* * * *

BUT A strange thing happened that April morning when I turned back from the hills and took instead the road that led to town.

Are there thought waves? Stan said there were, said that he had sent me a message along them, and had expected me to be in town to meet him.

But waiting there that morning in the road was good enough, he said.

I hadn't known who he was, driving toward me in the hired buckboard, and me half-speechless, meeting him like that. He hadn't known me, either, at first—thought I was a boy in my boots and knickers. He had been back in the jungles of Guatemala, back in the banana lowlands (where I was searching for

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

him in my dream) when my wire was forwarded from Galveston. Receiving it, he had wound up the business that took him there, and left at once by rail, sending me no message except along the thought waves. (Oh, Stan, you monster!) If I didn't get that message there would be the fun of surprising me.

He looked older, maturer, for these nearly three years, and as brown as he used to be here at the Cottonwoods. The wonder—the wonder of seeing him again.

He knew nothing, nothing at all, except that Don and Zali had married. Maam's telegram about Aunt Rena, forwarded from Galveston, had apparently arrived after he left.

Ride with him back to the house. Let him get a bath and a change, for it had been a dusty trip. It was close to midday, to dinner. We would all see him then. After dinner Maam would tell him.

On the ranch-house gallery he took me by the shoulders, holding me, looking down at me. How blue his eyes were. How intensely blue in that tanned face. "It's the same Heather," he said, "yet different too. I thought when I left I might never see her again."

I had thought the same. How much had befallen us since that morning. We were not the same people now. Not the same at all.

* * * *

THAT afternoon Stan and I rode up among the hills. Maam had told him only about Aunt Rena's death, leaving the rest for me to tell.

It was good to tell him, good to talk with him while Max and Piper grazed. Good to unpack your heart. It would have been an easement to share with anyone the things that had happened, but most of all with Stan. I remember how he listened as we sat in the oak shade where the hills roll down to the wood. No one could listen so quietly as Stan. It must have been hard, that listening, for Uncle Steve had been his idol from childhood, and Aunt Rena something dearer still.

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

Strange how he seemed to understand what Uncle Steve had done. He had no word of blame for him. This would not surprise me now, knowing my menfolk. It surprised me then.

Long silences, while we sat close. Long silences as the sun dropped low, and all was told that needed to be told.

"Will you take me to Guatemala, Stan?"

"Someday, maybe. I'm not going back for a year. That will give you time. That will give you plenty of time to see the world."

"Oh, the world. I've seen it."

"Where?"

"Right here. This ranch is the world. Any place is the world."

"This may be the earth, Heather. It's not the world. All you know is this ranch. The only men you know are the punchers, and Don and me."

"That's enough."

"Yes, of course you thought so. Such a thing as your marrying Don never occurred to me. The old lady's a general—we all know it—but who would have expected her to operate in the field of romance? She did, and it set me back on my heels. I guess—"

"Did you want me yourself, Stan?"

"Want you? I've intended to have you from the time you were eight. I gave you my heart then—solid silver—and you fed it to a cow. Something of the sort happened again just before your sixteenth birthday. You promised yourself to Don, and so far as I could see you were perfectly satisfied."

"No, I just didn't mind. It was you I loved."

"Since when, Heather?"

"Since the time of the storm. I knew then I loved you. How long it was before that I don't know."

He drew me closer and kissed me. Many times I had kissed Stan, in greetings, in good-bys. I had not dreamed of such a kiss as this, merciless and sweet, a quivering darkness in which I met a stranger, master of my pulses, master of my will. My arms went round his neck. He kissed my eyelids shut.

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

"Heather—Heather, darling, I've always wanted to do that. Dear gold eyes—dear mouth—I've always wanted to take you away with me, every time I left, every time I rode away. We're starting tomorrow," he said. "Next day, anyhow. You're going to see the world."

"And the ocean."

"Yes, and a good time. You're going to play, to have fun—for a year. Then maybe you'll go with me to Guatemala. That is, I hope I'm man enough to wait a year."

I held him tighter.

"I hope not, Stan."

* * * *

IT WAS on the ride home that I thought of Maam and how formidable her objection might be.

I said to Stan, "She's got me headed for the Rix Ranch, and she'll never consent to my turning back. She promised Aunt Rena I'd be free when the time came, but the time hasn't come."

"Then I'll steal you," said Stan. "I've got a buckboard waiting—I brought it on purpose—and we'll fly."

After all, it was he who dealt with Maam.

He waylaid her in the sitting room, and I could hear them as I waited on the gallery. The last talk they had had was when Maam told him I was going to marry Don, that I was promised to Don. I think Stan would have found it pleasant now to tell Maam that he was going to marry me himself. He felt in honor bound, however, to leave that matter still in doubt.

He said only that I needed a change, and asked if I might visit his Aunt Lila for a while.

Maam said no, it was not practicable; arrangements had been made for me to visit the Bonanza outfit in Arizona.

Stan answered that from ranch to ranch would be no change. Besides, his Aunt Lila was expecting me.

So was Mrs. Rix expecting me, said Maam, and if Heather

COTTONWOODS GROW TALL

was going to be a rancher—and who said she wasn't?—she shouldn't object to going from ranch to ranch. Besides, after all, Arizona was a change from Texas.

"It's hotter," admitted Stan, and Maam said that claim had not been proved. "Besides, if Heather goes to Galveston she'll need clothes. It will take her a month to get ready."

"She can buy the clothes when she gets there," Stan said. "We've got plenty of stores."

The argument was in able hands, and to me, listening, it seemed that Stan had the best of it. However, Maam didn't give in till that night. She came to my room then and told me that Uncle Steve said I should go, that the promise they had made meant freedom now.

I spent the next day packing my small wardrobe in a trunk that had been Aunt Rena's. Maam was being generous with me; she knew from experience with Zali what clothes cost out in the world. I said good-by to Piper. Oral Klepper would ride him while I was gone. They liked each other.

That evening we all sat late in the patio, talking. When we parted for the night Don said to me with a smile, "We may meet in our wanderings. Good luck."

Uncle Steve laid a hand on my shoulder.

"We'll miss you, Heather," he said.

* * * *

I SAT in the hired buckboard with Stan. It was dark dawn around us, dark as we started into the world, and an April chill in the air. I drew the jacket of my new suit tighter. . . .

So this was how they looked when you rode away. All of them on the gallery, Maam and Don and Zali, Uncle Steve, Miss Keezy and Ellen, Scotty and Ticker, Bunch and Trink and all the rest, gathered in the flicker of the gallery lamps, joking, smiling, wishing you well. Stan picked up the reins; then just for an instant I saw her, standing beside Don under one of the lamps, her red head shining. . . . Good-by, good-by!

MARGARET BELL HOUSTON

Waving now, all of them waving as the restive horse took the buckboard into the Street, under the still-sleeping cottonwoods, Stan's bag and my trunk bouncing behind.

I waved back as long as I could see them.

And now the road to town, past the canyon and the dugout trail, through the rolling dim acres, toward the Ridge and the reddening east. . . .

Tonight I would see the ocean.

Tomorrow I would see the world.

